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BITTERROOT LANDING: AN ADAPTATION FROM NOVEL TO STAGE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia  
December 2006

## Acknowledgement

I would like to thank all of the people who have helped and encouraged me to pursue my dreams. These people include friends, family, and teachers who gave me guidance and support. Of these people, there are three individuals I would like to single out, because without their presence in my life I would not be where I am today.

To Rosanne Harvey, for whom this work is dedicated. Your passion and enthusiasm for the arts was infectious. You introduced me to the world of theatre; you opened my eyes to a bigger, brighter world. I will forever be indebted to you for taking me to my first Broadway show; it is an experience I will never forget. I am so honored to have had the opportunity to share that life-changing moment with you...I am deeply saddened that you aren't here now to share in this one. You are always in my heart and mind. I miss you.

To Joel Harvey, who has been my friend for more years than I can count, and who has stood beside me in the good times and the bad. You made many sacrifices so that I could achieve my educational and theatrical goals...I can never repay you for all you have done for me. I thank you.

To Scott D. Foard, my love, my friend, my own personal cheerleader. I truly would not have succeeded in my endeavors if it were not for your unending encouragement, love, and support. You have taught me so many lessons about life and about myself. You remind me on a daily basis that it's okay to dream big and to be confident in who I am. You taught me to have faith in all things. I love you.

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# Abstract

## BITTERROOT LANDING: AN ADAPTATION FROM NOVEL TO STAGE

By Christy Leake, M.F.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2006

Major Director: Dr. Noreen C. Barnes  
Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Theatre

My thesis explores the process involved in adapting Sheri Reynolds' novel, Bitterroot Landing, into a stage play. During the adaptation process I faced numerous challenges, including structural issues, expanding or changing dialogue, omitting or melding scenes and characters, and dealing with the serious themes of incest and sexual abuse. This thesis describes these challenges and the steps I took to overcome them.

## **{CHAPTER 1 Subverting the Theatrical Paradigm}**

My first exposure to theatre was in my early twenties at a local college production of My Fair Lady, where I played the part of the bedazzled and beguiled audience member. I had never seen a stage production before and although the set was meager, the costumes unremarkable, and the acting/singing mediocre, I was smitten. I had always loved and admired film and books for their ability to transport audiences to a different plane and allow them to live in someone else's skin for a few hours. Therefore, I was thrilled to discover that theatre brought about the same effect, but added immediacy, spectacle, and energy through live performance that cannot be replicated on screen or in writing. It was on that day that I discovered the incredible, explosive world of theatre, and my passion and zeal for it has grown ever since. Since that time theatre has become my true love, my Achilles heel, my educational focus, my livelihood, and my source of unending excitement, astonishment, frustration, and enthusiasm.

### **The Purpose of Art**

The existence and appreciation of art is universal and timeless. Since the beginning of recorded history, humans have been reaping the benefits of creating and enjoying art in all its various incarnations. For the purposes of what I am writing here, I

will focus on the art of theatre. However, what I have to say could be applied to all art forms as well.

Art increases our ability to think abstractly. In theatre, we are watching events unfold onstage. Sometimes these events are portrayed in a realistic light, other times not. Nevertheless, even when the play is covered in realism, the actual presentation of a play is in and of itself an abstract event. No matter how realistic the set is or the costumes may be, no matter if the play has a “slice-of-life” feel to it, the audience knows, and buys into the convention that what is happening on stage is all “make believe.” An actor on stage sings to us that there is a field of corn “as high as an elephant’s eye” just off stage left; we believe him. An actress holds up a blanket-wrapped bundle, cooing and fawning over it and then burping it; we know that the lump is supposed to be a baby and we say “okay.” This allows the audience to expand their minds and think in a way that perhaps they had not done since childhood – abstractly.

Art allows us to examine important elements of our lives and society as a whole. When we watch a play, we are looking for things that strike a chord in us. Whether it be a social injustice that we are adamant about fighting or a silly little love story that reminds us of our first time falling in love, we want to find a connection to ourselves. This does not mean that everything put on the stage must mirror real life. On the contrary, I think that plays that are the least realistic are the ones that have the biggest impact when we make that connection because we are able to look past all of the differences in our circumstances and see that we are all just human beings.



Art has the ability to shake people up. This is a good thing. People need to be woken up to the world around them, and to the possibilities in life. Art is a revelation. Art is a mind-expander. Theatre is a form of entertainment but that does not mean that it should be safe and stagnant. Even if you go to a play and are offended and disturbed by what you see, at least you leave the theater examining what it was that offended and disturbed you.

Theatre can be shocking without being done merely for shock value. There is nothing worse than witnessing an art form that uses elements for the sake of shocking the audience. Nudity on stage can be shocking; it can also be integral to the storyline. Violence can be disturbing; it can also be used to illustrate the horrors of it, not the glorification of it. Profanity can be off-putting; it can also be used to help indicate the essence of a particular character. Sexuality on stage can be offensive; it can also be used to challenge the hegemonic prudish nature of this country.

Art that makes you uncomfortable is valuable because it makes you think. Theatre that evokes a strong response in people is the essence of what makes theatre an amazing art form because it can inspire action and promote change.

### **The Theatre I Do**

I think that theatre created for the sake of entertainment, complete fluff and mindless fun, has its place. Every once in a while I choose to expose myself to this type of entertainment and every once in a while I actually enjoy it. I utterly loved Hairspray in all its bouffant-hairdo, torn-up drag queen, glitzy, cheesy glory. And I will admit that

I am quite fond of the musical Beauty and the Beast – who doesn't love a dancing carpet? But a steady diet of this type of theatre numbs my brain and lulls me into this bucolic, America's-Funniest-Video-watching complacency where everything I'm passionate about falls by the wayside and all I seem to care about is staying in this nice, safe vegetative stage, letting the world revolve around me without my taking an active part in it. To me, that is what's wrong with most of this country – being in this apathetic, unimaginative fugue state because it's safe and you don't have to hear or acknowledge all of the unpleasantness taking place in the world and you don't have to take any action or even think about it because you don't let it enter your world.

I want to do theatre that makes the audience think. I don't necessarily want to teach the audience specific lessons or shake them up to the point that they don't know what is going on. However, I want people to leave the theatre and have something in their minds they can mull over, something profound, not just some pretty little ditty from an inane musical. Therefore, taking on a project such as Bitterroot Landing was perfect for me because it is melding two art forms that I love (literature and theatre) and the story is poetic, powerful, and poignant. It delves into dark, serious topics such as sexual abuse, incest, and self-mutilation but it also delivers messages of hope and personal empowerment. Bitterroot Landing has all the makings of a profound theatrical production due to its rich characters, lush imagery, and thought-provoking themes.

## {CHAPTER 2 The Process}

### Germination of an Idea

Ever since I can remember I have been an avid reader. I have read everything from science fiction to trashy romance novels; from Stephen King to Jane Austin. I love books and I have an enormous list of favorites. However, few books have made a significant impact in my life, have caused the hairs on the back of my neck to stand up because of the truth and beauty of the words, have compelled me to read the book for the second time mere minutes after having finished it for the first. Bitterroot Landing is one of those books. Reading that book for the first time was a *moment*, one that has remained with me for many years.

I first read Sheri Reynolds's novel, Bitterroot Landing, in 1997 and immediately fell in love with it. The reason I wanted to adapt this particular novel is because of the rich, poetic voice encapsulated in it and the power of the storyline – overcoming insurmountable odds to achieve personal acceptance. During my undergraduate college career, one of the classes I took was called “Experiments in Scripting and Staging.” The class's description is: “Creating scripts from existing sources, both narrative and non-narrative, with emphasis on traditionally non-dramatic/non-theatrical material. Staging experimental performances of the scripts.” During this class, I immediately thought of Bitterroot Landing as a work that I would like to adapt to the stage but did

not get a chance to do so during the course. Ever since then I have kept the idea in the back of my mind as something I would like to work on and I jumped at the chance to adapt Bitterroot Landing for my graduate thesis at Virginia Commonwealth University.

### **Approach to Adaptation**

I began the adaptation process by taking everything in the novel and putting into play format, even scenes I knew could not possibly be used in the final production script. The reason I did so was because I found myself editing the script as I was writing it, which was frustrating as well as stifling to the creative process. I decided it was better to just put it all on paper and then go back to edit and rework at a later date.

Once the novel was in basic “play format,” it was still not an actual play. It was 120 pages and, although faithful to the book, needed to be pared down. Therefore, my next step was to go through the script and decide what worked and what did not and either rework scenes or cut them depending on their necessity to the progression of the storyline. I also wanted to reduce the amount of locations, flesh out certain characters while removing others that were not essential, add or rearrange dialogue so that scenes flowed better, and, most importantly, ensure that the main plotline – Jael’s quest to overcome difficult circumstances and gain personal acceptance – remained intact.

### **Melding Visions**

One of the challenges I faced in adapting this novel was retaining the story’s power and poetic beauty while also making it a viable stage piece. Described by critics

as a “lyrically written tale” (Publisher’s Weekly qtd. in sherireynolds.com) that opens “with a rush of pure poetry that begs to be read aloud” (Richmond Times-Dispatch qtd. in sherireynolds.com), the story of Jael is a compelling saga “of wrenching sorrow and spiritual renewal” (Virginian-Pilot and Ledger-Star qtd. in sherireynolds.com). In my adaptation, as in the novel, Jael is her own storyteller. The reason for this is because I did not want to lose the lush imagery that permeates throughout the novel, mostly in Jael’s narrative passages. Therefore I used the stage convention of direct address to the audience to maintain this narration. This works especially well in the opening and closing monologues of the adaptation, which are also the opening and closing first person narratives in the novel.

Another challenge I faced in adapting a novel to the stage was wishing to infuse it with my own insights while being as true as possible to the original author’s vision. There are many parts of the book that I had to omit from the adaptation and it was sometimes a hard choice to make as to which ones to cut. My criteria for deciding what scenes to keep and what scenes to remove came from my vision of what were the most important elements of the story. To me, the most important message of the book, and the one I want the audience to leave the theatre with, is that of hope. Even with Jael’s difficulties in life, she is able to rise above the trauma inflicted upon her and find strength in herself. Therefore I chose the scenes that I felt best represented Jael’s journey to find personal acceptance despite insurmountable odds.

## **Characters**

The story of Bitterroot Landing revolves around Jael – she is the main impetus behind everything that happens in the course of the novel (and subsequent adaptation). This is her story. All of the other characters are seen through the eyes of Jael. Some of the characters are more important than others and some had to be removed all together because they were not integral to the plotline.

In the novel, the first thirty pages deal with Jael's life with Mammie and River Bill and the sexual abuse she suffered while under both of their care. In the adaptation, I only spend three scenes (seven pages) on her time with Mammie and River Bill because I wanted the majority of the play not to be focused on the abuse taking place but rather on Jael dealing with the traumatic aftereffects, overcoming them, and beginning the triumphant journey to recovery. And despite the fact that I focus so little time on Jael's life during her time with Mammie and River Bill, both characters (and the men who abused Jael while she was under Mammie's care) continue to show up throughout the rest of the play as pervasive forces that haunt Jael and make it difficult for her to heal her emotional wounds.

Part of Jael's recovering involves her relationships with her boyfriend, Wallace, and her social worker, Helen. I tried to retain as much of these characters' scenes as possible because through these characters Jael is able to learn to trust and love people again. This is especially true with Wallace, who is Jael's first love relationship. He teaches Jael that not all men want to hurt women and that sex should be something that is consensual and not forced upon someone against their will. With the development of their relationship, Jael is able to open up to Wallace and tell him things that she had

never been able to speak of to anyone before. His love and understanding helps her find her own strength to conquer the fears that were getting in her way of becoming a whole person.

In the novel, as is the case with the stage adaptation, three women rescue Jael from her life in the wilderness of Bitterroot Landing. Sheri Reynolds writes, and I tried maintaining, that Jael does not know whether or not these women existed. To Jael they are flesh and blood women whom she observes at their campsite. However, Jael has suffered not only emotional trauma from the sexual abuse, but physical trauma as well. She has been living in the wild for a long stretch of time without proper nutrition and has been cutting herself to the point of having serious infected wounds. By the time Jael happens upon the women, she is a very sick young woman. Therefore when the paramedics arrive, and they tell her that there is no one else at the campsite but her, she wonders if perhaps the three women were mere figments of her fevered mind. Jael also has an encounter with a woman at the Laundromat named Magdalena. Magdalena returns to Jael at night for a romp under the moon but Jael again ponders whether or not this truly happened or if she merely dreamt it.

This implication that Jael is prone to see or hear things that do not exist shows up frequently throughout the novel and in my adaptation. In the adaptation I retained the sense that Jael may have been hallucinating the three women at the campsite, as well as her other interactions with entities that do not exist. Jael regularly chats with the statue of the Virgin Mary and a wax figure dubbed “the Dark Woman.” In describing the voices that Jael hears and the visions that she sees Reynolds describes her belief

“that we are always our youngest selves and our oldest selves, simultaneously, that even at our worst times we can be our own wise granny, that we have access to knowledge of things we haven’t yet experienced or have long since forgotten.” Therefore, I wanted to maintain the interactions between Jael and the “voices” she hears from the Virgin Mary and the Dark Woman figure because they represent Jael’s own inner voice and strength.

In the novel Jael also talks to a statue of the Baby Jesus. I decided to eliminate this from my adaptation for a few reasons, the most obvious being that it would be difficult to stage. The statue of the Virgin Mary as a character presents some challenges but can be accomplished by having an actress with appropriate make-up and costume start off a scene in a frozen position to indicate to the audience that this character is a statue come-to-life. Having a statue of the Baby Jesus come to life proves to be a bit more difficult seeing as finding an actor to cast as a baby would be impossible. This could possibly be worked around by changing the age of the Jesus character but I decided against it because I did not think the presence of the character was essential to the story, I was afraid of it being a little too over-the-top, and I liked the idea of having the trinity of Magdalena, the Virgin Mary, and the Dark Woman to mirror Jael’s three female rescuers at the beginning of the story. I thought this made for a nice balance in the story and it would also be interesting to have the three females who play Jael’s rescuers also play the parts of Magdalena, the Virgin Mary and the Dark Woman. Also with the use of the trinity, it echoes the rest of the religious symbology prevalent throughout the play.



## Structure

One of the biggest problems I faced involving the play structure was the number of locations in which the story takes place. Prior to reworking some of the scenes to limit the number of sets, I had four locations that I have since removed. I omitted scenes that took place at a small town gas station and the outside of the Laundromat (although I kept the scene that takes place inside the Laundromat) and I changed the location of the scenes that took place in Wallace's house and the diner to taking place in Jael's apartment. Even now, after reworking some of the scenes in an effort to facilitate the scenic design elements, it will need an imaginative set design to accommodate it as it stands currently.

Another challenge was turning a novel that is mostly first person narrative into a stage play. There were a number of times I had to rework or add dialogue to help establish characters or flesh out scenes that in the book were mostly narrative. The first significant instance of this takes place in Scene 3 of the adaptation when Helen is trying to convince Jael to live in a half-way house once she is discharged from the hospital. In the book, the first part of the conversation between Helen and Jael is told in first person narrative and so for the adaptation I turned it into dialogue. Here is the passage from the book:

At first, she tried to talk me into living in a halfway house with a bunch of other women, mostly former criminals. I argued that I didn't deserve to have criminals for roommates...We talked about my options for

several days, and I insisted that I wanted to get a job and live alone – or have a room of my own at the very least. (Reynolds 66)

Here is how I adapted it into dialogue:

HELEN: Now Jael, it's not as bad as you think.

JAEL: No. I'm not going to do it.

HELEN: At least come and take a look at it and then decide.

JAEL: I don't want to go. It's scary.

HELEN: It's not, believe me. And if you'd come and see for yourself, you'd see that you have no reason to be scared or nervous. They are just women like you trying to get they're lives back on track.

JAEL: They're criminals.

HELEN: Former criminals. They aren't dangerous. (*Beat.*) Look, Jael, a halfway house is set up to allow people the opportunity –

JAEL: Helen, please don't make me.

HELEN: I'm just your caseworker, Jael, I can't make you do anything. It's just...well, it's just that we're running out of options. All the missing-persons checks were completed and, well, no one came to, um...claim you. I'm sure someone in your family will eventually show up. I mean, someone out there somewhere has to know you and know where you belong. (*HELEN gives a nervous little laugh.*) The problem is that...well, you can't stay in the hospital forever. (*HELEN gives another nervous laugh.*) So, the Social Services Department's biggest concern right now is finding you a place to live. Until you're reunited with your family, of course.

JAEL: But it's not my fault I can't remember anything. I don't deserve to have criminals as roommates.

HELEN: Jael, you're coming at this from the wrong way. If you could just see what a wonderful program they have set up. I was so impressed when I went to go check out the facility –

JAEL: Then you go live with the convicts. I don't want to.

HELEN: (*Sighs.*) Okay, Jael. What do you want to do?

JAEL: I want...I want to get a job...and live alone. Or have a room of my own at least.

Another change I made from the novel to the adaptation was the removal of some of the characters. The main reason I did this was because they were peripheral to the main storyline and were not prominent figures in Jael's life. Some of the characters were removed because scenes they were in did not make it into the final draft of the adaptation. These omitted characters include a man named Joe who comes to one of the Incest Survivor Groups, a man named Mike who harasses Jael at the Laundromat, an old man who points Jael and Wallace to the direction of Bitterroot Landing, and the Baby Jesus.

In retrospect, I realize now what a difficult book Bitterroot Landing was to take on as a stage adaptation project. The book really does not lend itself to the stage for a variety of reasons. Besides the fact that the story broaches subjects that are difficult to address in general, let alone put on stage, the episodic nature and the number of locations the story is set in made it an extremely complicated novel to adapt. However, I do feel that it is worth the effort and that it is a viable piece for the stage.

### **{CHAPTER 3 Research}**

Bitterroot Landing deals with incest, sexual abuse, and the consequent traumatic effects of these atrocities. While in the adaptation process of turning Bitterroot Landing into a stage play, I researched these subjects so as to gain a better understanding of them. In the book, the main character of Jael is sexually abused throughout her childhood and teenage years by strangers and her adopted father. During Jael's journey through recovery and self-acceptance she must battle the horrific repercussions of the abuse including suffering from symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.

#### **The Immediate Effects of Sexual Abuse**

The feelings that Jael experiences because of her sexual abuse – confusion, guilt, denial – are extremely common for sexual abuse victims (Orsillo). Jael suffers confusion over the sexual abuse inflicted on her because she does not understand why anyone would want to hurt her, especially people whom she trusts (Reynolds 169). The first time Jael is sexually abused occurs when she is a young girl living with an elderly woman named Mammie, whom we assume is either her mother or grandmother. Mammie runs a country store out of her home where, at night, she sells home-brewed liquor to the local men of the town. At nights, these drunken men come to Mammie's

to carouse, play pool, and, as it soon becomes apparent to the reader, molest young Jael (Reynolds 14, 41). Mammie makes Jael work in the store and when Jael begs Mammie not to force her to be subject to the lecherous behavior of the drunken clientele, Mammie tells Jael that she'll "get used to it" (Reynolds 15). Jael eventually ends up accidentally killing Mammie in an attempt to escape Mammie's wrath and the perversions of the drunken men.

After Mammie's death, a deacon of the local church adopts Jael. Although somewhat stoic, River Bill seems at first to be a kind, caring man of God. Initially Jael is somewhat afraid of River Bill, but she soon grows fond of him because of his gentle nature and good will. Because of his kindness and the fact that he is now her father, Jael feels obligated to trust him. However, River Bill betrays that trust when he begins having sex with Jael while she is under his guardianship, and as she says: "it confused me like nothing before" (Reynolds 23).

Jael does not know why neither Mammie nor River Bill, both who are supposed to protect her, do not keep her safe (Reynolds 68). Mammie, although aware of the sexual abuse being inflicted on Jael, does nothing to stop it. Moreover, Mammie herself inflicts her own form of abuse on Jael with physical violence whenever she is angered (Reynolds 16). River Bill's sexual abuse confuses Jael because she is unsure as to what her role is – daughter or wife (Reynolds 23). She also feels a sense of loyalty to him because he is her father and he does take care of her. This is a common dilemma for children who are sexually abused by a family member or someone for whom they feel affection or loyalty. The child trusts and cares for the person that is abusing them

but they also know that what is happening to them is wrong (“Child Sexual Abuse;” “Incest”).

These opposing feelings cause the victim to not only feel confusion but also tremendous shame and guilt as well (“Adult Survivors of Incest”). They feel that somehow they are responsible for the abuse and these feelings increase when the abuse is by an acquaintance or relative (“Incest;” Orsillo; Bogorad). This shame and guilt often are the reasons why women do not report their sexual abuse to the authorities (Orsillo). Jael feels guilt for hating River Bill and having murderous thoughts about him (Reynolds 42), but she loathes his actions and the fact that he invades her space as often as he likes with no consideration for her (Reynolds 30). Even after she leaves River Bill, she is reticent to tell anyone about her abuse because she feels a sense of responsibility and also immense shame.

Because of this shame, Jael creates a lie about suffering from amnesia (Reynolds 65-66). She does not want anyone to know about the abuse she suffered and she pretends like it did not happen. Many victims of abuse are in denial and refuse to acknowledge their sexual abuse (Orsillo; Bogorad). Because of this sort of denial, Jael lies to everyone she knows, including people who care about her, such as Helen – her social worker – and Wallace – her boyfriend. This makes Jael feel guilty, but she continues to lie because she is afraid of being sent back to River Bill and is ashamed about what happened to her. Jael finally begins to come to terms with what happened to her when she listens in, and eventually attends, an incest survivor group meeting.

### **The Effects of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder**

In addition to the immediate effects of the sexual abuse, the long-term repercussions of the atrocities committed against Jael continue even after the abuse ends. Throughout the novel, Jael demonstrates symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is the most prevalent “psychological consequence of sexual assault” (Sharkansky). The effects of PTSD that Jael exhibits include interpersonal or social problems, sexual anxiety and disorders, dissociation, fear of medical procedures, nightmares, flashbacks, perceptual disturbances, and self-mutilation (“Adult Survivors of Incest;” Bogorad; “Effects of Child Sexual Abuse?;” Orsillo; “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder;” Sharkansky; Whealin).

Jael finds it difficult relating to other people. She often comments in the novel how different she is from other people and this seems to cause her some distress (Reynolds 49, 67). She is awkward in social situations and tends to be extremely nervous around men, oftentimes terrified by them (Reynolds 86,179). Jael finds it difficult to trust people because she was betrayed before by people she trusted and she fears men because all of the men in her life abused her in some way.

One person that Jael does eventually learn to trust is Wallace, with whom she begins to have a relationship with throughout the course of the story. It is slow going at first and Jael has difficulty being intimate with Wallace. From the initial moment Jael talks to Wallace she feels anxious and panic-stricken (Reynolds 89). Jael hesitates inviting Wallace to her apartment because she dislikes the thought of a man invading her personal space (Reynolds 151). Throughout their blossoming relationship, Jael has

problems with intimacy and sex. Whenever she and Wallace are in a sexual situation Jael has a flashback to her sexual abuse, either at the hands of the customers from Mammie's store or from River Bill. Sometimes when Jael looks at Wallace she sees River Bill or envisions "the old ones" kissing her (Reynolds 118, 124, 209).

When Jael and Wallace become intimate for the first time, she experiences a flashback and a sense of panic (Reynolds 116). To quiet the horrible thoughts running through her head, and to calm herself down, she recites the serenity prayer that she learned from listening to the incest survivor group meeting. This act of dissociation or detachment from reality is common among sexual abuse victims ("Incest;" Orsillo; Sharkansky,). Every time River Bill violated Jael, she would try to separate herself from what was happening. Jael describes the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of River Bill and her detachment from the experience:

He made his way into my space as often as he liked. He was gentle and never hurt me, but I hated it just the same. Each time, I gritted my teeth, swam orange in the pool behind my eyes. Each time, I felt my lungs flutter and contract. I swallowed the tears like medicine. And the howls.  
(Reynolds 30)

Another form of detachment from reality that is common among victims of sexual abuse is perceptual disturbances or hallucinations ("Adult Survivors of Incest"). Jael hears and sees things that aren't really there. Throughout the book, Jael often communicates with entities that are solely in her imagination. Jael recognizes this and



wonders if she is crazy (Reynolds 144). She also wonders whether some of the people that do seem real are in fact hallucinations as well. She is unsure about reality.

Jael comes across people on a regular basis that may or may not exist. She meets three women that rescue her from Bitterroot Landing. When the paramedics arrive, they tell Jael that there is no one else there, and when Jael looks down from the helicopter she sees that the women and the campsite are gone. She begins to wonder whether or not the three women were hallucinations (Reynolds 59). When Jael begins working at the church, she makes friends with the Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus statues and converses with them on a regular basis. Jael also befriends a woman, Magdalena, of unknown mental stability at the nearby Laundromat. Magdalena comes to visit Jael one night for a moonlit romp, and Jael wonders again whether or not it was real or a figment of her imagination (Reynolds 91). Jael creates a small female figure out of wax, ash, and seashells which she refers to as the Dark Woman. Not surprisingly, considering her penchant for communing with statues, the Dark Woman begins to talk to Jael and often dispenses sage advice (Reynolds 132).

Jael also has visions of Mammie and often dreams horrifying nightmares about Mammie's death and her own sexual abuse. Nightmares are common effect of sexual abuse victims suffering from PTSD, as are flashbacks ("Child Sexual Abuse;" Orsillo). Flashbacks are described as "when memories of past traumas feel as if they are taking place in the current moment" ("Flashbacks"). Jael experiences flashbacks, as do most sexual abuse victims, when she is faced with something that reminds her of her past abuse (Sharkansky). In Jael's case, most of her flashbacks occur during intimate

moments with Wallace. Other times flashbacks occur when she is feeling trapped or panicked about something, like being confronted by a strange man at the Laundromat or when Wallace puts a wet washrag on her face (Reynolds 162, 178).

Many sexual abuse victims also experience flashbacks during medical examinations, particularly gynecological exams (Sharkansky). In Bitterroot Landing, Jael experiences a similar reaction when she has a pelvic exam by a gynecologist. Just hearing that Helen has scheduled a doctor's appointment for her sends Jael into a panic (Reynolds 136-37). At the appointment Jael tries to persuade the doctor to examine her while she standing or sitting in a chair instead of in the stirrups. The doctor refuses and Jael complies until the speculum is inserted – Jael has a posttraumatic reaction and bolts from the examination room (Reynolds 140).

Like Jael, many victims of sexual abuse have difficulty in dealing with these types of overwhelming emotions and so they look for a way of coping with them. Some resort to cutting or injuring themselves which is known as self-mutilation, self-harm or self-injury. In fact, almost 50% of self-injurers claim to have been sexually and/or physically abused during their childhood (Conterio and Lader; Kalb). Jael begins cutting herself when she is stranded at Bitterroot Landing. The first time she does it she feels relieved:

That same day I took the sharp end of my stick and engraved a cross  
with two bloody little cross-beams into the inside of my thigh. I  
hummed to myself as I carved, and my song numbed the pain until I

hardly felt it at all, and I was glad there was a place for the blackness in me to drain out... (Reynolds 42)

These feelings of numbness and relief while self-mutilating are true of many self-injurers (Kalb). Jael also self-injures as a way of claiming herself (Reynolds, 205). This is also the case for some victims of sexual abuse who turn to self-injury as a way of coping; they “self-mutilate to gain control over their bodies or to express their feelings about being abused” (Kalb). Jael stops cutting herself once she finds ways of coping with her feelings and gains control of her life (Reynolds 205).

Jael embodies many of the characteristics of real-life sexual abuse and incest victims. She feels estranged from the rest of society, overwhelmed with feelings she can not control, anger at those who hurt her, confusion over why her family did not protect her, fear of invasive medical procedures, trepidation towards men, recurring flashbacks and nightmares wherein she must relive her abuse, and a lack of coping mechanisms that force her to mutilate herself just to let the pain out. In the end of Jael’s fictional story, she finally finds herself on the path to recovery and self-acceptance. She cannot change her past circumstances but she can prevent these circumstances from ruling the rest of her life. Jael may only be a fictional character but her story can offer hope and encouragement to the hundreds of thousands of women and children a year that are sexually abused.

## {CHAPTER 4 Comparisons}

In doing research for the adaptation of Bitterroot Landing, I have read and analyzed five modern plays to compare and contrast how they deal with the issue of incest. The plays I have chosen are The Moonshot Tape by Lanford Wilson, Pterodactyls by Nicky Silver, Buried Child and Fool For Love by Sam Shepard, and Metamorphoses by Mary Zimmerman

The Moonshot Tape was written by Lanford Wilson in 1990 as a companion piece to his play Poster. This one-act is written as a monologue for a character named Diane, a writer who has returned to her hometown and is being interviewed by a college student. During the course of the interview, one of the questions Diane answers is “How did living in a small town, essentially a rural area, prepare you for a career and living in a metropolitan area? Or not?” (Wilson 257). While answering the question, Diane explains how her father left her mother when she was five and that her mother remarried a man named Tom when Diane was 11 years old. She describes how her stepfather would come into her room on nights when he had been drinking and molest her (Wilson 258).

Diane tells the interviewer that the molestation occurred until she was 16 years old – it stopped when she moved in with a friend during her last year of high school.

She recounts the time when she finally broke down and told her mother what was going on and her mother's only response was to slap her and accuse her of lying (Wilson 258).

The character of Diane is obviously very strongly affected by the sexual abuse from her stepfather. She confesses that she became quite a slut in college, alluding to the sexual abuse as the reason behind it (Wilson 259). She also is estranged from her family, especially her stepsister, Edith, who looks down on her for her bohemian lifestyle (Wilson 261).

Diane ends the interview by describing the last time she saw Tom. She went home to visit for her high school reunion. She says that when she saw Tom he was very "respectful" and that he claimed that he had "found God." Diane arranged a time to be at the house when the family was not there except for Tom (Wilson 259). When she had him alone she tied him up and cut his clothing off of him (Wilson 259-260). Once he was bound and naked, she confronted him about molesting her, an accusation which he denied. Diane then proceeded to arouse Tom and have sex with him, all the while writing the story of her childhood molestation with marker on his naked chest. When she was done, she left him like that for her family to find and left (Wilson 260-261).

Wilson describes the sexual abuse inflicted on Diane by her stepfather in lurid detail:

He'd stand by the side of my bed in the dark, pull the covers back and feel my breasts, rub his enormous dick against my cheek, turn my head over and fuck my face. Or stick his dick in my mouth and come.  
(Wilson 258)

This graphic account is due to the fact that it is being told to us by the victim herself – a woman who is obviously bitter and angry over the fact that these atrocities were committed against her and no one did anything to stop it. The fact that her mother knew about it and turned a blind eye has obviously contributed to Diane's anger. But because the play is taking place in the present and the recount of the molestation that is being told to us happened many years ago, there is a sense of distance when Diane is talking about it. Obviously, although she talks about it in a cavalier and blunt way, the molestation still haunts her. But due to the years that have past, and her act of revenge on Tom, Diane does seem to have a sense of closure as well.

In Sam Shepard's Buried Child, the incest that takes place is never spelled out in elicited details as in Wilson's The Moonshot Tape. The play is about a dysfunctional family living on a farm in rural Illinois. Dodge and Halie are the mother and father of three boys – Tilden, Ansel, and Bradley. Ansel has died before the play begins and Tilden and Bradley are both not without their individual issues. Tilden, who it seems used to have a full and happy life, is now recovering from some trauma in his past, living at home with his parents after having been run out of New Mexico for some unknown offense. Bradley, although not living at home, is completely dependent on his parents, especially his mother, due to his lack of intelligence and a leg.

As soon as the play begins, we are given small clues here and there and things aren't exactly right with this particular clan. When Halie defends Bradley to Dodge claiming that he's Dodge's "flesh and blood" and that Dodge should go easy on him, Dodge responds by saying, "He's not my flesh and blood! My flesh and blood's out

there in the backyard” (Shepard, Buried Child 21). Even more suspicion is raised a page later when Tilden asks Dodge, “Why’d you tell her it was *your* flesh and blood?” (Shepard, Buried Child 22).

Things became even stranger after Halie leaves and Tilden absconds with Dodge’s whiskey. A young man, Vince, and his girlfriend, Shelly, arrive at the farmhouse with Vince claiming that this is his grandparent’s house. When they happen upon Dodge, he claims not to recognize Vince, who tries to refresh his grandfather’s memory by stating that he’s Tilden’s son (Shepard, Buried Child 32). Dodge responds with, “Tilden’s son, Vince. He had *two*, I guess” (Shepard, Buried Child 32).

Later, after Tilden returns (and also does not recognize Vince) and Vince leaves to get Dodge some more whiskey, Tilden confides in Shelly about a baby that was born. Dodge becomes frantic for Tilden not to continue and has a coughing fit which keeps Tilden from telling the whole story (Shepard, Buried Child 47). It isn’t until Act III, when Dodge tells Shelly the whole story. Halie had a baby late in life, even though she and Dodge hadn’t had sex in a long time. She tried to pass it off as Dodge’s baby but he knew it wasn’t...and according to Dodge, Tilden knew this more than anyone else. Tilden used to take the baby everywhere, singing to it and holding it. Dodge claims he couldn’t let that mistake continue, ruining his family, so he killed the baby and buried it in the backyard (Shepard, Buried Child 66). At the end of the play, after Dodge has died, Tilden comes into the house carrying the muddy, cloth-wrapped remains of the buried child (Shepard, Buried Child 73).

Shepard is very sly about the revealing of the incest and consequent child that is born between Halie and her son, Tilden. In fact, it is never blatantly stated that Tilden is in fact the father of Halie's baby. But the innuendo is extremely hard to miss. Dodge refers to the baby as being a "mistake" and that Tilden knew better than anyone else that the baby wasn't Dodge's child. Therefore it is impossible not to realize that Halie and her son Tilden had an incestuous relationship.

Another Shepard play that deals with incest is Fool for Love written in 1983. This play begins with the meeting of a man and woman in what seems to be a tumultuous love affair. They meet in a hotel room and argue about Eddie's relationship with a countess and his propensity to leave May for months at a time. Throughout most of the play an old man is sitting off to one side of the stage, obviously not a part of the present scene taking place but commenting on it every now and then.

Things start to heat up when May tells Eddie that she has a man coming to take her to the movies. He's taken aback, obviously more than a bit jealous over the notion. She doesn't want Eddie to be there when her male friend arrives but Eddie seemingly jokes that she could just introduce him as her brother (Shepard, Fool For Love 66). A page later, he refers to himself as her cousin, but we assume this is all for the expense of May's male friend so as not to incite jealousy over having her ex-lover show up at her hotel room. However, the audience begins to suspect things are not exactly as they seem when the old man makes the comment, "I don't recognize myself in either one of you" (Shepard, Fool For Love 72).



When May's friend, Martin, does eventually show up, she introduces Eddie as her cousin. Eddie promptly tells Martin that she's lying. Again, we assume that May introduced Eddie as her cousin as a ruse to not cause Martin to be suspicious at the nature of their relationship. However, we find out a few pages later the real reason for the lie. After May goes into the bathroom to get ready for the movies, Eddie confides in Martin a little secret – May really isn't his cousin...she's his sister, or his half-sister at least. They had the same father and different mothers. We come to find out that Eddie and May's father was a bigamist and had two separate families that did not know about each other. As Eddie explains it, "by the time I found out (that she was his sister) we'd already fooled around" (Shepard, Fool For Love 82).

Again, Shepard does not come right out and tell us that the play is about incest, but rather allows the story to unfold, slowly giving us insight into the characters and their relationship.

In the play Metamorphoses, Mary Zimmerman takes the famous classical work by Ovid and gives it a more modern twist, including the incestuous story of Cinyras and his daughter Myrrha. In the epic poem by Ovid, as well as the modern retelling by Zimmerman, the story of Cinyras and Myrrha is used as a way of warning people not to ignore Aphrodite by refusing to give in to love. In the myth, Myrrha refuses to fall in love so in retribution, Aphrodite "seizes" her with passion for her father, Cinyras (Zimmerman 53). After Myrrha is smitten with her father, she is unable to fight the feelings she has for him and even questions whether or not incest is really as bad as

everyone makes it out to be, citing the fact that animals participate in incest and some countries do not find it taboo (Zimmerman 53-54).

Myrrha has a dream about her father and it torments her so that she considers suicide (Zimmerman 55). Her nurse walks in on her attempt and tells Myrrha that she will help the girl no matter what. When Myrrha confesses that she is in love with her own father, the nurse is shocked, but sticks to her promise of assistance (Zimmerman 56). The nurse plots to arrange a tryst between Cinyras and Myrrha and when Cinyras's wife goes out of town, she sets up a meeting between the two, telling Cinyras that a young girl that admires him wants to meet him (Zimmerman 57). The one condition, however, is that the young girl is shy and does not want to be seen, therefore Cinyras must wear a blindfold (Zimmerman 58). He agrees and the nurse brings Myrrha to him. The two meet and have sex several nights in a row (Zimmerman 59). On the third night, Cinyras is insistent to see the young woman, but she refuses. He takes off his blindfold anyway and is shocked to discover his daughter before him. His reaction is to lunge at her and try to drown her. Myrrha escapes and runs off to exotic lands (Zimmerman 60).

Unlike the two Shepard plays, Metamorphoses does not beat around the bush that this story is about incest. We find out within the first few lines of dialogue that Myrrha is in love with her father. The difference between this story and Bitterroot Landing or The Moonshot Tape is that the child is the one who initiates the incestuous affair with the parent instead of the other way around.

Nicky Silver's Pterodactyls is another foray into the life of a dysfunctional family living in denial. The play centers around the Duncan family. The mother is an alcoholic and the father, a Hugh Cleaver wanna-be who is obsessed with his job and tries to find a rapport with his children so he can have the persona of a caring and understanding father. Emma, the daughter, cannot remember anything, including her brother Todd, who comes home to live after contracting the AIDS virus. The play never hides the fact that something is definitely not right with the Duncan clan, but it isn't until page 106 that we begin to realize why Emma has memory lapses when her father describes what it was like when Emma was a little girl:

ARTHUR: You were my little girl. (*He embraces her*) When I came home from work, I'd give you some gum and you hugged me.

EMMA: I did?

ARTHUR: And I stroked your hair.

EMMA (*A little sick*): You did?

ARTHUR: And I whispered your name, and I loved you, and I kissed –

(*Emma pushes away*)

EMMA: Is it any wonder I can't remember a thing!

Later, when Emma is frantic to get Tommy, her fiancé, to leave after the wedding she describes her father coming to her at night and she is frightened of him. Later, after her father loses her job and her fiancé confesses that he is in love with her brother and has contracted AIDS from him, Emma shoots herself upstairs. When the next scene continues, the family is destitute and Arthur is inconsolable after Emma's

death. He talks about how much he loved her and how beautiful she was (Silver 145).

Todd accuses his father of wanting to have sex with her, which Arthur vehemently denies. Todd claims that Arthur was the one who essentially killed Emma because of him constantly “Leering at her, starting at her, touching her...Kissing her” (Silver 146).

Like Buried Child and Fool For Love, the incest in this story is not immediately thrust upon us, as in Metamorphoses, nor is it talked about in graphic detail, as is the case with The Moonshot Tape. Again, we are presented with a family that obviously has issues but these issues are given to us slowly throughout the play.

The five plays broach the subject of incest in a variety of ways. The Moonshot Tape is a graphic first hand account of a girl being molested by her stepfather. In Buried Child, incest is only hinted at in the conception of the unwanted child that is killed and buried by the cantankerous patriarch, Dodge. Similarly, in Pterodactyls, the playwright unravels the intricacies of the family slowly and only hints at the incest that has taken place between Arthur and Emma. Fool For Love, however, does not hint around about the incest that is taking place between half-siblings, but the fact that the two are brother and sister is not revealed until near the end of the play. Metamorphoses also does not hint around about the incestuous relationship between father and daughter, and in fact the incest is played out on the stage, not just talked about as is the case with the other four plays.

In the novel, Bitterroot Landing, the main character, Jael, accidentally kills her Mammie and is placed under the guardianship of a church deacon who goes by the name River Bill. After River Bill takes Jael in, he begins to have a sexual relationship

with her. As Jael describes – “I’m not exactly sure when I became his wife instead of his daughter” (Reynolds 23). This confuses Jael and affects her life in profound ways.

## **{CHAPTER 5 In the Future}**

When I began my adaptation, my initial goal was to have a staged reading of the play at the end of the Fall 2005 semester and then a full production of it in the Spring 2006 semester in the Newdick Theatre. However, upon further review, I decided this was not possible because of the constraints of the Newdick Theatre space and the limited resources available to me. Therefore, I decided instead to stage a reading of the play in either the Spring or Fall 2006 semester. Sadly, this never came to fruition due to my inability to procure a full cast in time to put together a staged reading production.

The problem I kept having was finding enough people who were available during the same span of time. The play has twenty one characters, and although I doubled (sometimes tripled) roles, I still needed ten cast members. I thought about doing the staged reading with less than ten people, but I was concerned about the play becoming confusing with a single actor taking on more than two or three roles. I felt to do the play in this manner would be detrimental to the portrayal of the piece and would not sufficiently provide the result I desired from having the staged reading. Therefore, I decided that rather than pulling together a substandard production I would instead focus on developing ideas for a full production at a later date.

My ideal setting for doing a production of Bitterroot Landing would be in an Ann Bogart-esque environment. I would love to get a group of actors and designers together and workshop this piece to make it thrive on the stage. I feel that there are elements to this play that I have yet to unearth or explore to their fullest extent. Also there are some technical issues that I would like to hash out with some imaginative set and lighting designers.

For example, there are quite a few locations indicated in the script. The set design would have to be able to accommodate these scene location shifts quickly and smoothly so as not to interrupt the flow of the play. I do not envision the need for huge set pieces but rather movable set pieces that can be pulled on and off without too much fuss. I also realize that there are bodies of water present in the play and that is not an easy thing to put on stage, nor would I want them to be. Rather I envision light effects and minimal sound effects to indicate that there a river or a stream present.

Other parts of the play that will need to use light and sound effects are during Jael's flashbacks. In the script I have it written as "*FLASHBACK: the eerie spot light comes up on one of the far sides of the stage. YOUNG JAEL stands in the half-light. The sound of heavy breathing and a loud, throbbing heartbeat is heard. An impending sense of doom.*" That is a somewhat generic version of what it is I actually would want to do for those moments. During Jael's flashbacks, I want to create an atmosphere of uneasy surrealism. When sexual abuse victims experience flashbacks, it is almost an out-of-body experience and they are transported back to the moment the abuse occurred. In the flashback scenes, as well as the gynecological exam scene, I want the

audience to be surrounded by that sense of confusion, entrapment, and terror through the use of lights and sounds.

As far as casting goes, although I was willing to double and triple roles in the staged reading, I feel that if this is done in a full production it would have to be done with extreme care. The only instance in which I think this would benefit the play is having the actresses that play Amy, Caroline, and Mariah (the women who rescue Jael in ACT I) also play the Virgin Mary, Magdalena, and the Dark Woman. As I said in Chapter 2, I like the symbology of the trinity (whether in Christian religion with the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost triptych or the Pagan religion with the Mother, Maiden, and Crone). It also makes sense to me that the women who rescued Jael from the wilderness would reappear in her life (or mind) as liberating forces.

The hardest part in this process was trying not to direct the play as I was adapting it. I constantly had to force myself to stay focused on the task at hand and not insert elaborate stage directions that were unnecessary to the development of the storyline. The reason for this is because I have such a strong desire to direct this play. From the moment I read the novel, I knew I had to take these beautiful characters and poetic words and put them on stage. Because I am not a playwright, I thought about waiting until someone else created an adaptation of the novel. Sadly, my impatience and deep longing to direct the story Bitterroot Landing got the better of me and I took on the project myself. My first step was to adapt the novel to a stage play. My ultimate goal is to take the play and put it on the stage where it belongs.



## {CHAPTER 6 Sheri Reynolds}

Sheri Reynolds was born and raised on a small farm outside of Conway, South Carolina. She began her first foray into writing at Conway High School, where she subsequently won numerous awards for her literary efforts (“Sheri Reynolds’ biography”). Upon graduating high school in 1985, Reynolds entered Davidson College majoring in English. She earned her Bachelor’s degree in 1989 and three years later obtained her Master of Fine Arts in creative writing from Virginia Commonwealth University (“Author;” “Sheri Reynolds’ Biography”)

It was during her time as a graduate student Virginia Commonwealth University where Reynolds wrote her first novel, Bitterroot Landing. She was enrolled in a writing workshop with Tom De Haven, who assigned his students to write a novel. Reynolds decided to write her book using a story from the Old Testament as the foundation. In Judges 5, a woman named Jael drives a tent peg into Sisera’s head in order to save the Hebrew people. Sheri thought that it would be “fun to imagine what sort of contemporary situation would yield up a sympathetic rationale for hammering a tent peg through somebody’s head” (Reynolds, “Book Notes”). However, once she began writing, the story began to deviate from its Biblical origins and the character of Jael took on a life of her own.

Sheri Reynolds gained notoriety when Oprah Winfrey chose her second novel, *The Rapture of Canaan* (which later went on to become a *New York Times* bestseller), as an Oprah Book Club selection. Besides being the author of four novels – *Bitterroot Landing* (1994), *The Rapture of Canaan* (1996), *A Gracious Plenty* (1997), *The Firefly Cloak* (2006) – Reynolds has also taught English and creative writing at Virginia Commonwealth University, The College of William and Mary, and Davidson College. Currently she is an associate professor and the Ruth and Perry Morgan Chair of Southern Literature at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, where she won the 2003 Outstanding Faculty Award from the State Council for Higher Education in Virginia. In 2005 Reynolds received a playwriting grant from the Virginia Commission for the Arts and that same year won the Women Playwright’s Initiative playwriting competition with her first play entitled *Orabelle’s Wheelbarrow* (“Author Sheri Reynolds biography;” “Sheri Reynolds”).

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## APPENDIX A

### Script for Bitterroot Landing

#### ACT I

##### Scene 1

*(Lights up. It is night. There is a small, run-down house with a front porch. The house doubles as a small country store that sells homemade herbal remedies during the day, and strong drinks brewed with more potent herbs at night. There is an old garden hose attached to an outdoor water faucet. An old rusted shovel is lying next to the house. Nearby is a patch of green - a lush herb garden – where an old woman is sitting on an overturned bucket. This is MAMMIE. She is ancient, red and wrinkled with her dark gray hair pulled into a bun at the back of her neck. She is wearing a faded, worn dress and scruffy boots. She scrutinizes the leaves of the plants in front of her. The door of the house opens, and a young woman enters onto the porch. This is JAEL. She is barefoot and dressed in scruffy cut-off jeans and a dirty t-shirt. Her long, red hair obviously hasn't been combed in days and is pulled back into a ponytail. She bends down to pick something off of the porch and looks at it for a moment before pocketing it. It could be a pebble, a piece of glass, or a chip of paint. Whatever it is, it has become her new treasure.)*

##### JAEL

For as long as I can remember, I've searched for things to worship – bits of rock, storm fronts, bugs with turquoise glitter on their wings. But rocks chip, storms churn themselves out, and bugs can be crushed with a heel or a raindrop. Gods change colors and spin themselves new garments every day. The most we can hope for is to be allowed to watch. *(Beat.)* I have learned that the products of worship are always two-fold. If you study the moon too hard for too long, it will fall down luminous upon you. And with moon in your eyes and moon anchoring your feet, you can never see the stars again. *(Beat.)* I'm looking for the place where worship finds balance, where it does not debase me or exalt me so high that I can't return. Gods change colors and spin themselves new garments every day. I want to be able to stand in awe of them, one at a time.

*(She looks over at MAMMIE and then crosses to the garden. JAEL plops down on the ground; she is now twelve years old.)*

MAMMIE

*(Without looking up from the leaf she is examining.)*

This here. This here'll make you sleepy.

*(She plucks the leaf from the plant and holds it out to JAEL.)*

Taste.

JAEL

*(Not taking the leaf.)*

It's a weed. And I don't wanna go to sleep.

MAMMIE

Open your mouth.

*(JAEL doesn't want to taste the leaf but opens her mouth anyway, her eyes tightly shut. MAMMIE places the leaf on JAEL's proffered tongue. JAEL quickly chews up the leaf and swallows it. She opens her mouth wide, her tongue out, showing MAMMIE that the leaf is gone.)*

Ain't no weed. *(Beat.)* You better be gettin' ready for bed. You got school in the mornin'.

*(JAEL doesn't move. She pulls the treasure she had found on the porch out of her pocket and begins to examine it closely.)*

Go on. Don't want you cryin' in the mornin' yer too tired to get up.

JAEL

I don't wanna go to school.

MAMMIE

Don't be startin' that now.

JAEL

Mammie, please. I don't like it there. Let me stay here with you. You teach me things. You teach me things lots more interesting than in school.

MAMMIE

School's another kind of learnin'. It'll make you smart for the world. What I teach you, well, that's for just us. It's private. So, don't you be tellin' the things I teach you to people.

JAEL

I won't tell.

*(MAMMIE slaps JAEL across the face.)*

JAEL

Mammie!

MAMMIE

That's a warnin'. If I find out you been tellin' my secrets you'll get worse, you hear?

*(JAEL nods and MAMMIE goes back to her plants.)*

Now, get goin'.

*(Lights down as JAEL heads towards the house.)*

## Scene 2

*(A few nights later. The setting is the same, however, this time there is the loud sound of voices coming from inside the house. The voices are from drunk and rowdy men – MAMMIE's customers. One man comes out onto the porch, a jug of some potent drink in his hand. He slurs out some parting remarks back inside the house, lurches off the porch and then exits. JAEL enters from offstage.)*

JAEL

For miles around people knew about Mammie's secret wisdom. They knew she had special ways to brew her drinks that made them the sweetest and strongest around. In the evenings, our house doubled as a store, and long into the nights I could hear the men in the front room playing pool and arguing, slamming things around. On those nights, I took to the woods.

*(JAEL becomes her twelve year old self and scurries offstage. MAMMIE comes out onto the porch from the house. She is dressed similarly as in Scene 1, but has donned an apron over her dress. She too has been partaking of her special*



*brew and stumbles as she comes down off the porch. She crosses to the side of the house and calls out into the night.)*

MAMMIE

Jael! Jael!

*(To herself.)*

Goddamn it, girl.

*(Clears her throat and yells.)*

JAEL!

*(JAEL enters from offstage. She has been hiding in the woods.)*

Come over here, now. And hurry. There's customers waiting.

JAEL

What is it, Mammie?

MAMMIE

Look at yer hair.

*(She pulls a comb from her apron.)*

I'll be surprised to get a comb through it. Come on.

*(MAMMIE starts tugging the comb through the tangled mess.)*

Yer gonna help me in the store tonight.

JAEL

No, no, Mammie. I'm too little –

MAMMIE

Y'ain't little no more. 'Leven years old – er maybe twelve. Time to put you to work.

JAEL

Please, no. They'll bother me.

MAMMIE

Who do you mean?

JAEL

The men.

MAMMIE

They ain't gonna hurt you. You'll get used to it.

JAEL

I don't like them men. They come in my room when I'm sleeping. They – Please, Mammie. I'm scared of them.

MAMMIE

They ain't nothin' to be scared of. They're just men. You'll learn how to handle 'em.

*(She puts the comb away and then smooths down JAEL's hair.)*

Well, that's as good as it's gonna get. Come on, you need to be gettin' more drink up from the cellar.

*(JAEL starts to cry.)*

Hush, now. Don't be startin' that.

*(JAEL tries to fight back her tears but it makes her sob even harder. MAMMIE grabs JAEL by the shoulders and shakes her.)*

Hush, girl. Yer makin' a racket.

*(MAMMIE reaches down to pick up the garden hose. JAEL wrenches herself loose from MAMMIE's grasp. MAMMIE tries to strike JAEL with the garden hose, but JAEL moves out of the way. MAMMIE goes after her but JAEL avoids her grasp by staying as far away as possible. MAMMIE stops after a moment, breathing hard.)*

MAMMIE

Jael. Don't make me come after you, gal.

*(JAEL doesn't move. They stare at each other across the stage.)*

It's yer last chance, girl. Get in the house. *(Beat.)* Alright. That's it. I'm gettin' the switch right now. Gonna tear yer hide up.

*(JAEL tries to run off into the woods but MAMMIE cuts her off and chases her back towards the house. JAEL sees the shovel and picks it up. Frantically, she swings it around to ward off MAMMIE, who is right behind her. The lights go down and we hear the thud of the shovel making contact with MAMMIE's skull.)*

### Scene 3

*(Lights up on a small shack. There is one room that is both living area, dining area and bedroom. In the bedroom area there are two small cots pushed up against opposite walls. There is a curtain separating the bedroom area from the rest of the room. The curtain is pulled open. As the lights come up, JAEL is sitting on the couch reading a book. JAEL looks up from her reading.)*

#### JAEL

After Mammie died I became a ward of the court, and I slept on a cot in the basement of the Pentecostal church until a recently widowed deacon named old River Bill, offered to take me in. One of the ladies from the church came to deliver the news. She said that it was a miracle from God that a man like River Bill would take a wild girl like me to raise as his own daughter. She said it was a blessing in disguise that one of Mammie's regular customers had bashed her brains out over a bottle of liquor. She said there was new hope for my heathen soul. *(Beat.)* It didn't bother me at all for one of those men to take the blame for my crime. It was their fault. And I knew they'd never pay for half the crimes they committed. I blamed them completely. *(Beat.)*

#### RIVER BILL

*(Enters the house. He puts his fishing equipment on the table.)*

Time for bed.

*(JAEL continues to address the audience as she gets dressed for bed. She crosses up to the bedroom area and closes the curtain.)*

#### JAEL

Although I was a little afraid of River Bill, I liked him. I'd never had a father before. I'd always wanted one. He lived in a house by the river and ran a little store for fishermen that I worked at for the next eight years.

*(Beat. Then the curtain opens. JAEL is dressed in an old-fashioned nightgown.)*

I'm not exactly sure when I became his wife instead of his daughter, but it confused me like nothing before.

*(She sits down on one of the beds.)*

It didn't make me mad; it made me hot and restless and lonely. He was a toughened man who could have beaten me but never did, and I knew it couldn't be a sin since he prayed at night and woke singing hymns in praise of each red sunrise. He was gentle and never hurt me, but I hated it just the same. Each time, I gritted my teeth, and swam orange in the pool behind my eyes. Each time, I felt my lungs flutter and contract. I swallowed the tears like medicine. And the howls.

*(JAEL lies down on her cot. RIVER BILL crosses up to the bedroom area and crosses over to where JAEL is sleeping. RIVER BILL pulls JAEL's nightgown up and lies down on top of her. There are muffled sounds and then he is pushing inside of her, wheezing and panting heavily. Sounds of RIVER BILL panting are the only thing heard as the lights go down.)*

#### Scene 4

*(Lights up on the outside of RIVER BILL's house. On the porch sits JAEL. She is sitting in a rocking chair, drinking a glass of water and engrossed in a book. Next to her are two ice chests. THOMPIE HAYES enters. He's young - around twenty-five - tanned and muscular, wearing only cutoff jeans.)*

THOMPIE

Mornin'.

*(Startled JAEL drops her book. She stands abruptly and sees THOMPIE grinning at her. She bends down to pick up the book. THOMPIE eyes her cleavage as she bends down.)*

Nice tits.

*(JAEL looks up at his grinning face for a moment. She then throws the glass of water in THOMPIE's face, turns and heads inside the house.)*

THOMPIE

Hey! Hey, wait. I'm sorry.

*(JAEL pauses.)*

I deserved that. I'm real sorry.

JAEL

Fine. What can I get for you?

THOMPIE

I need some jelly worms if you got any.

JAEL

How many?

THOMPIE

About two packs.

*(JAEL reaches into one of the ice chests and pulls out two packs of worms.)*

THOMPIE

Name's Thompie Hayes, by the way.

JAEL

*(Holding out the pack of jelly worms to him.)*

You owe me three dollars, Thompie.

THOMPIE

*(Reaching into his pocket.)*

Yes, ma'am.

*(He pulls out a crumpled wad of bills from his pocket and hands three dollars to JAEL.)*

You got a name?

JAEL

Jael.

THOMPIE

That's a place for criminals. What's your name?

JAEL

J-A-E-L. That's my name.

THOMPIE

Well, Jael, if you're not too busy, why don't you sit down and talk awhile.

JAEL

I *am* busy.

THOMPIE

Doing what?

JAEL

Just don't make yourself too comfortable.

THOMPIE

So what's it like, living out here on the river?

JAEL

I...I like it.

THOMPIE

*(Laughs.)*

Is that all you can say? That you like it?

JAEL

*(Smiling.)*

I like it.

THOMPIE

So you live here with your family?

JAEL

Sort of.

THOMPIE

You got brothers or sisters?

*(JAEL shakes her head "no.")*

Wait, wait, wait one minute. You ain't married, are you?

*(Pause then she shakes her head again.)*

JAEL

So where's your wife today?

THOMPIE

I'm not married.

JAEL

Then your girlfriend. Where's she?

THOMPIE

*(Grinning.)*

Don't have a girlfriend, either. And you changed the subject. We were talking about you. And I already got you figured out, Miss Jael. Your mamma's dead, ain't she? And you live alone here with your daddy. You sit up here on this porch and tend the store and read books. Books about everything. Sometimes your relatives float in for a fish fry, but mostly it's just you and nature. That right?

JAEL

Who told you that?

THOMPIE

I guess you could say I pieced it together. Truth is, I come from a town about a hundred miles up the river. I been camping and fishing my way down. The people on the water know about your daddy's store, and they sure know about you. You're a regular legend, Miss Jael. Is all that stuff true?

JAEL

The truth doesn't really have much to do with anything now, does it?

*(They stare at each other for a moment.)*

THOMPIE

I guess not. *(Beat.)* Too bad you're busy minding your daddy's store.

JAEL

Why's that.

THOMPIE

I was just gonna ask you if you wanted to take a ride in my boat.

*(Beat. JAEL looks over her shoulder as if she suspects RIVER BILL to be lurking there. She looks at THOMPIE for a moment and then starts to grin.)*

JAEL

Come on, then. Let's go.

*(The lights fade as the two exit.)*

## Scene 5

JAEL

All afternoon we parted the open waters, driving in one direction, full speed ahead. We didn't even stop to fish. We passed beneath bridges, and we zipped by sand bars. When the sun dropped low in the sky, we docked at a sandy deserted landing. Thompie said we'd probably crossed state lines, and I felt triumphant for no particular reason. On the beach we found a clearing amid the trees. In the white river sand, Thompie dug me a little bed, undressed me and put me in it. He covered me with his own body, and no bugs bit me all night long.

## Scene 6

*(Night. A river bank. On one side of the stage there is a tiny camper. On another part of the stage, in a separate location than the camper, there is a huge tree that had been pushed over during a storm. The result is a large hole in the ground with an awning of tree trunk and roots. On the beach near the camper, JAEL is curled up fast asleep. She stirs awake, props herself up, and tries to rub the sand from her eyes.)*

JAEL

Thompie. Can you come here?

*(Long pause. No answer. JAEL rises and crosses downstage to the river. She takes a handful of water and splashes it on her face. She takes another handful which she drinks. She calls out again.)*

Thompie! Thompie, I'm awake now.

*(JAEL looks around. THOMPIE is nowhere in sight. Then JAEL notices the boat is missing.)*

Thompie Hayes, you're an asshole!

*(JAEL sits down and starts to cry. After a moment, she gathers herself and takes another look at her surroundings. She notices the small camper. She crosses to the camper and enters. Suddenly she screams and runs immediately back outside, shaking and breathing heavily.)*



Water moccasin

*(JAEL gets a large stick from the ground. She reenters the camper, brandishing the stick. A few moments later she returns with a pack of matches and some fishing line. She sits down and begins fashioning a fishing rod out of the stick and the line.)*

JAEL

The days that followed were busy ones as I fished and familiarized myself with the surrounding land, but they were easy days, too. By the second morning, the fear was gone. The anger was gone. Thompie's face was such a blur that I couldn't have picked him out of a police lineup if I'd needed to.

*(JAEL stands and crosses over to the tree. JAEL begins examining the tree.)*

Upon exploring, I came to a place where a tornado had ripped through, overturning some trees and transplanting others. One great oak had resisted the storm, had, in fact, merely leaned into it so that half of its roots were pulled from the earth and the other half remained planted. The result was a large hole in the ground with an awning of tree trunk and roots.

*(Lights begin to slowly dim, indicating night approaching. JAEL crawls into the small crevice between tree and ground.)*

That night I slept beneath the giant oak, curled up against a wall of wood. To me that tree, that home, smelled just the same as the river, only dryer, and it seemed that I could feel the earth's moisture flow through my body and pass into the tree's vascular system. And I was just another limb. Nothing more.

*(Lights down.)*

## Scene 7

*(Lights up on the fallen tree. JAEL is perched on top sharpening her stick with a rock. Humming to herself, she takes the stick and scratches the inside of her thigh.)*

I began marking myself. Each evening after cooking and eating the fish I caught from the river, I'd straddle the trunk of my leaning tree and carve a fresh notch in my body. I marked myself in other ways, dipping the prickly ends of sand-spurs into berry juice and then jabbing the spurs into the soft skin on the inside of my arm. I drew a purple

crescent moon and also a tiny star. I aimed to cultivate scars in pretty patterns of my own design. I etched my name onto one hip to remind myself that I had a name. *(Beat.)* The days ran together as they became hotter. It was probably midsummer on the day that I first heard the voices, but at first I assumed my imagination was taking advantage of the heat and my hunger.

*(The sound of voices and laughter. JAEL looks around and then ventures off of her tree as the lights go down.)*

### Scene 8

*(Lights up on the camper area. Three WOMEN have just finished putting up a tent. Their backpacks are on the ground beside a pile of firewood. JAEL lingers on the edge of the clearing behind leaves and bushes, camouflaged. She drops to the ground and stretches out on her belly to observe the three women. CAROLINE kneels down next to the firewood and begins constructing a campfire. AMY wanders down towards the edge of the river and begins playing softly on a wooden flute. MARIAH sits next to the tent, fills up a small pipe and begins smoking it. CAROLINE finishes her construction, rises, and strips off her clothing. She wanders down to the river and wades in. MARIAH puts down her pipe, undresses and joins her friend in the river. They begin laughing and splashing each other with their hands and feet. They turn and look at AMY.)*

### CAROLINE

Amy, put down your flute and swim!

*(AMY puts down her flute, smiling, and takes off her clothes. She races towards the other two WOMEN. The three WOMEN splash one another, laughing and shrieking, reveling in one another's friendship and camaraderie. JAEL stands and returns back to her tree. Lights fade on the three WOMEN.)*

### Scene 9

*(Lights up on JAEL as she sits on her tree. If she had tears to cry, they would be coursing down her cheeks. After a moment, she picks up a sharp rock and drags it across the flesh on her belly. She then digs her fingernails into the skin on her thighs, tearlessly weeping at the pain she is inflicting on herself. The lights go down.)*

### Scene 10

*(Lights up on the tree. It is early morning and JAEL is nestled under her tree. She is cold and shivering. In the distance, JAEL can hear the sound of the three WOMEN talking and laughing. JAEL crawls out from under her tree and crosses towards the women's area. Lights down on the tree as lights come up on the three WOMEN. They are sitting beside the tent, chatting and passing around the lit pipe. In between puffs, CAROLINE massages AMY's feet and MARIAH massages CAROLINE's shoulders. JAEL crouches behind the bushes, silently observing the WOMEN. JAEL addresses the audience from her position.)*

### JAEL

It occurred to me then that I hadn't been touched in a long time. The trees had touched me, and earth and water. But I hadn't had a human touch, warm hands – or even icy hands. No hands at all.

*(She looks down at her own hands that are rough and dirty.)*

Thompie's touch had been the most recent and probably the most soothing in my life. But since he deserted me, the memory of his touching left a rawness in my mouth – like metal or cold sores. Something you don't want to dwell on. *(Beat.)* Before Thompie was River Bill. But he rarely stroked me with the sort of kindness I witnessed as I watched those women. He touched me the same way he touched his new boat – glad to have it but touching it for his *own* pleasure. There was nothing in it for me. *(Beat.)* Before River Bill, there'd been Mammie, who alternated between gentleness and violence. When I was small, her touches had reassured me. Sometimes during thunderstorms she scratched my back or rubbed my feet. Other times her wrath didn't spare me as she'd beat me with her cane across my back. With Mammie's touching so unpredictable, it was hard to enjoy, much less anticipate. *(Beat.)* And of course I was touched by the customers in her store. They would corner me in my bedroom late at night and press themselves into my mouth, their hands gripping my shoulders hard. And their touching haunted me so that I refused to think about it at all, refused to acknowledge it at all.

*(Long pause as JAEL turns back to watch the WOMEN for a moment, who were still talking and laughing quietly with each other.)*

It was then that I realized I'd never been touched, really. I'd been handled. There was a difference. *(Beat.)* I imagined myself with those women, having them rub my back and stroke my legs. The thought ballooned in my chest until I found it hard to breathe.

*(JAEL sits up, dizzy from the hot sun and the infected cut on her stomach. Suddenly she retches loudly and begins vomiting into the bushes. The WOMEN*

*stop their chatting at the sound. Coughing and spitting, JAEL tries to stand up but slumps to the ground, fainting. The lights go down.)*

Scene 11

*(The lights come up on an unconscious JAEL lying on a blanket next to the women's tent. MARIAH is tending to her. She takes a cloth, dips it into the water, and wipes JAEL'S infected stomach. JAEL stirs and opens her eyes.)*

MARIAH

It's okay. I won't hurt you.

JAEL

*(Croaking weakly.)*

Sick.

MARIAH

I know.

*(MARIAH takes another cloth, dips it into the water, and uses it to wipe JAEL's brow.)*

What's your name?

JAEL

Don't – send – me – back.

MARIAH

You need a doctor. Can you tell me your name?

JAEL

Don't tell him – where I am.

MARIAH

*(Dips the cloth into the water, rings it out, and then passes it over JAEL's eyelids and lips.)*

My name is Mariah. I was here camping with two of my friends. But you already know that, don't you.

*(JAEL nods.)*

Well, they've hiked out to get help for you because you've been so sick. It might take a little while, but I won't leave you, okay?

*(JAEL nods again.)*

Can you tell me your name?

JAEL

Jael.

MARIAH

What?

*(JAEL points to her hipbone where she had carved her name.)*

Oh.

JAEL

Don't let him touch me.

MARIAH

Do you think you could drink a little juice? It might make you feel better.

*(MARIAH puts her arm beneath JAEL's neck, lifting her head, and holds a tin cup of juice for her to drink.)*

Are you cold, Jael?

*(JAEL nods.)*

It's warm under the covers inside the tent.

JAEL

I don't like it in there.

MARIAH

Can I bring the covers out to you, then?

*(JAEL nods. MARIAH reaches into the tent and pulls out a blanket.)*

Do you want to rest your head in my lap?

*(JAEL nods again and places her head in the woman's lap. MARIAH wraps the blanket around JAEL.)*

How are you feeling?

JAEL

Good. No, not good, I mean.

MARIAH

Your hair is the color of old maple leaves. I like to touch it. It curls around my fingers.

JAEL

Tangled.

MARIAH

*(Laughs.)*

Yeah. It doesn't look like you've combed it in a while.

JAEL

Not here.

MARIAH

I need to put some more medicine on your cuts.

*(MARIAH opens the covers and leans over JAEL, dabbing cream onto the cuts on her stomach, thighs and arms.)*

Where did these cuts and scars come from?

JAEL

Don't send me back.

MARIAH

Did somebody cut you?

JAEL

No, no –

MARIAH

Shhhh. It's okay.

*(After a moment MARIAH picks up the wooden flute and begins to play on it.)*

It's one of my favorite things. It's such nice music because it's so personal. No two people ever make the same sounds. It's like a fingerprint or a birthmark. Listen.

*(She softly begins playing the flute again.)*

JAEL

Thank you.

*(JAEL closes her eyes as the music continues. The lights go down. End of ACT I.)*

## ACT II

### Scene 1

JAEL

A helicopter came to rescue me but the people on it wouldn't let Mariah come with me to the hospital. I screamed and tried to run, telling them I had magic shoes but I was barefoot. The medics strapped me down to a stretcher and explained that there was no other person around. Just before they took me away, I scanned the area with my eyes and saw nothing familiar. No Mariah, no tent. I couldn't even find the campfire.

### Scene 2

*(A hospital room. The lights come up on JAEL lying in a hospital bed. DR. SONTHALIA enters JAEL's hospital room. DR. SONTHALIA picks up JAEL's chart and scans it over briefly before addressing JAEL.)*

DR. SONTHALIA

Good morning. I'm Dr. Sonthalia. *(JAEL stares at her blankly. Beat.)* I'm taking over your case from Dr. Johansson. *(Beat.)* He filled me in on some of the details of your rescue. It seems you've been through quite an ordeal. *(Beat.)* Now it says here in your chart that the only information you've been able to share with us is your name.

*(Beat. DR. SONTHALIA looks down at the chart.)*

Jael is it?

*(Beat. JAEL nods. DR. SONTHALIA begins examining JAEL.)*

Now Jael, can you remember *anything* else? Anything at all? (*JAEL shakes her head.*) Your address? (*JAEL shakes her head.*) Your family? (*JAEL shakes her head.*) Do you know how long you had been out there, in the area they found you? (*JAEL shakes her head.*) Do you remember how you got there? (*JAEL shakes her head. Beat.*) Do you have *any idea* how you got these wounds? (*JAEL shakes her head.*) This looks like some sort of ceremonial tattooing, Jael. (*Beat.*) Do you remember any special gatherings, any ceremonies?

(*JAEL shakes her head. DR. SONTALIA ends her examination.*)

Okay. That's okay. Things will start to come back to you over time. In the meanwhile, Dr. Johansson gave you a notepad to write down any memories you might have. Even if they seem silly or inconsequential, write them down. Any piece of information, no matter how small, could be the key to help us find out who you are and where you come from. Now get some rest, keep pushing the liquids, and I'll be back in to check on you later today.

(*DR. SONTALIA exits.*)

JAEL

I knew where I'd come from, at least in general terms, and I knew very well that I didn't intend to go back to River Bill. A vague notion of terror settled into the muscles about my neck and would not leave me. At the most unexpected times, it seemed like everything stopped inside my body. This happened when I thought – about anything at all. And the social workers would come in and try to get me to talk, to remember. They wanted to hold my hands but I wouldn't let them. I only cried once, and then I couldn't stop. I cried until exhaustion wrapped me like a shroud. And through the tears I told them I was sorry that I couldn't remember. And through the words were lies...the tears, I think, were real.

(*Lights down.*)

### Scene 3

(*Lights up on JAEL in her hospital bed. A woman, HELEN MARSTON, is sitting beside her. She is JAEL's caseworker; she is in her early 30s, with drab, flyaway hair, and is dressed very garishly.*)

HELEN

Now Jael, it's not as bad as you think.

JAEL

No. I'm not going to do it.



HELEN

At least come and take a look at it and then decide.

JAEL

I don't want to go. It's scary.

HELEN

It's not, believe me. And if you'd come and see for yourself, you'd see that you have no reason to be scared or nervous. They are just women like you trying to get they're lives back on track.

JAEL

They're criminals.

HELEN

Former criminals. They aren't dangerous. (*Beat.*) Look, Jael, a halfway house is set up to allow people the opportunity –

JAEL

Helen, please don't make me.

HELEN

I'm just your caseworker, Jael, I can't make you do anything. It's just...well, it's just that we're running out of options. All the missing-persons checks were completed and, well, no one came to, um...claim you. I'm sure someone in your family will eventually show up. I mean, someone out there somewhere has to know you and know where you belong. (*HELEN gives a nervous little laugh.*) The problem is that...well, you can't stay in the hospital forever. (*HELEN gives another nervous laugh.*) So, the Social Services Department's biggest concern right now is finding you a place to live. Until you're reunited with your family, of course.

JAEL

But it's not my fault I can't remember anything. I don't deserve to have criminals as roommates.

HELEN

Jael, you're coming at this from the wrong way. If you could just see what a wonderful program they have set up. I was so impressed when I went to go check out the facility –

JAEL

Then you go live with the convicts. I don't want to.

HELEN

*(Sighs.)*

Okay, Jael. What do you want to do?

JAEL

I want...I want to get a job...and live alone. Or have a room of my own at least.

HELEN

But you're not entirely socialized, Jael.

JAEL

You're holding it against me – that I'm different from you.

HELEN

It's just that a halfway house would give you a chance to learn to live with people. Group living has more advantages for you right now than going solo.

JAEL

I need some time to be alone. How am I ever going to remember who I am if I'm always trying to protect myself from the convicts in the next bed?

HELEN

I told you they aren't dangerous. Most of them were drug abusers –

JAEL

Or child abusers.

HELEN

They're being rehabilitated – the same as you.

JAEL

I'm not living in your halfway house. There's no way.

*(Lights down.)*

#### Scene 4

*(Lights up on JAEL in her hospital bed.)*

JAEL

I tried not to befriend Helen. Lying to a friend was a difficult act. I knew I'd fail at it. But it was hard not to like her after she'd been around for a while. I liked the way her

eyeshadow migrated up into wetly colored lines across her eyelids. I cherished her blinks. And then she'd smile back dumbly – thinking I was happy to see *her* and not just humored by her eye make-up.

*(HELEN enters carrying a bag of clothes.)*

HELEN

I know these probably aren't your style but I got tired of seeing you in those hospital gowns. So get up and get dressed.

*(JAEL opens the bag and pulls out a white shirt with purple polka dots and a long red skirt – akin to something HELEN would wear. JAEL laughs and exits to the bathroom to change.)*

When they finally discharge you, we'll go over to the Goodwill together and you can pick out some things for yourself.

*(JAEL enters wearing her new outfit. She twirls around making the skirt flare out around her.)*

You look exquisite.

JAEL

Thanks. *(Smiles.)* But I can't pay you for these. I don't have any money.

HELEN

You don't need to. They were donated. *(Beat.)* Listen, Jael. I probably shouldn't tell you this, but I think I might have found you a job.

JAEL

Where?

HELEN

Now, don't get excited yet. I'll still have to talk this over with the committee, and they're going to want to put you in that halfway house. But I spoke with a friend of mine, Arthur, and told him about your situation. He's the priest at a church just outside the city. Anyway, he said that they'd just lost their custodian, and they might be able to use you.

JAEL

What do I have to do?

HELEN

It isn't settled yet, so don't get your hopes up. *If* this goes through, you'd be dusting, polishing the railings, sweeping the steps. I'm pretty sure they hire a cleaning service to come in for the hard stuff.

JAEL

When would I be able to start?

HELEN

*(Laughing.)* Slow down. I still have to work out the details, and I think we probably shouldn't spend much time talking about it until I see how receptive the committee is.

JAEL

But where would I live?

HELEN

The woman who left the job lived with her family somewhere nearby, but Arthur mentioned an old apartment in the basement of the church. He said it hadn't been opened up in years, so he doesn't know what condition it's in. We don't need to worry about living arrangements just yet, though.

JAEL

A church would suit me fine. The Lord knows me well.

HELEN

Really? Do you remember something? Are you having a memory?

JAEL

No. Sorry.

*(To audience.)*

For a moment, I imagined telling Helen about my relationship to churches. What would she think if I said I'd been a deacon's daughter? Or wife? *(Beat.)* I decided against it...I wasn't sure of my phrasing.

*(Lights down.)*

## Scene 5

*(Lights up on a tiny, one-room, basement apartment. HELEN opens the door and she and JAEL enter.)*

HELEN

Home, sweet home. Pretty filthy right now but you can probably get it cleaned up this afternoon. I brought loads of supplies.

*(She places the bags of cleaning supplies on the floor as JAEL continues to look around her new abode.)*

I'll go let Arthur know we're here, give you a few moments to get familiar with your new home.

*(HELEN exits. JAEL wanders around the room, running her hands along the stone walls. While doing this, she comes across a hole in the wall near to the ground. She puts her eye up to it, trying to peer through. Unable to see anything, she grabs a broom and pokes the handle of the broom all the way through. JAEL gets a sponge or towel and plugs up the hole. A knock comes at the door.)*

HELEN

*(Through the door.)*

Jael? Jael, it's Helen and Arthur. Can we come in?

*(JAEL opens the door. HELEN enters with a man in his 50s. This is FATHER ARTHUR. He is a small, thin man, bursting with energy.)*

Jael, this is Father Arthur Burke. Arthur, this is Jael.

*(ARTHUR puts his hand out for JAEL to shake. After a moment's hesitation, JAEL does the same and the two shake hands.)*

ARTHUR

Jael, what a pleasure it is to meet you. *(Still pumping JAEL's hand enthusiastically.)* Now I don't have much time today to chat. I just wanted to get a chance to meet the lovely lady who is so kind as to lend an old man a helping hand. *(He laughs.)* Tomorrow if you would meet me in the church vestry, I can give you a tour and tell you in detail what work you'll be doing. Mostly you'll be doing vacuuming, dusting, some polishing, laundry, cleaning the statues. Oh, and of course the confessionals. You'll need to – well, you can just wipe things down in there every month or so. Nobody stays in there long enough to dirty them up. Of course the air needs fumigating.

*(He laughs heartily while JAEL laughs weakly, pretending to understand. ARTHUR looks down at his watch.)*

Forgive me, Jael, but I've have to leave. I think I've given you the basic gist of how things work around here. So, make yourself comfortable in your new home. And we can meet tomorrow at say 8:00am in the church?

*(JAEL nods. ARTHUR claps his hands together.)*

Wonderful! Wonderful! 8 o'clock it is!

*(He grasps JAEL's hand once again.)*

Jael, it is indeed a pleasure to meet you. Take care.

*(ARTHUR exits.)*

HELEN

He's quite a character, isn't he?

*(JAEL nods. HELEN laughs.)*

He can be a bit...overwhelming at first. But you'll love Arthur, believe me. Now, I also have to run. Will you be all right here by yourself?

JAEL

Yes. I'll be fine.

HELEN

I know, but it's your first night on your own and –

JAEL

Helen, I'll be fine. Really.

HELEN

Of course you will. Okay. Then I'll stop by tomorrow, in the afternoon sometime, see how you're making out. Maybe take you to lunch?

JAEL

Sure. I'd like that.

HELEN

Me too. Okay I'm going now. Really. (*Laughs. She hands JAEL a business card.*)  
 Now this has my office number and cell phone on it and I've also written down my  
 home number on the back. Remember, if you need anything at all, no matter what time  
 it is, *call me.*

JAEL

I will. Thank you. But I'll be okay.

HELEN

And I actually believe you. Which is why I'm going now. (*Beat.*) Bye, Jael.

(*She reaches out and gives JAEL a quick, and somewhat awkward, hug.*  
*HELEN exits as the lights go down.*)

## Scene 6

(*Lights up on the inside of the church.*)

JAEL

Mornings, when the earliest light shone through the stained-glass windows and cast its  
 silvery dimness on the high, pale walls, I would make my rounds though the church,  
 nodding to greet the stone statues who lived in separate domes on the perimeter of the  
 sanctuary. At the altar of Christ, I stopped to straighten the row of chairs, aligning them  
 like broken bones, crooked teeth, seashells washed up on the same spent wave.

(*Moves to the Madonna's altar which houses the "statue" of the VIRGIN  
 MARY.*)

The Madonna's altar was my favorite. She was the first woman I loved. (*JAEL picks  
 up a silver chalice and begins cleaning the VIRGIN MARY with water and a cloth.*)  
 Each morning I bathed her first, privately, pretending she was my own mother and that  
 her modesty required my immediate attention. I filled a silver chalice with holy water,  
 dabbing at her face gently with gauze and never letting my fingers graze her smooth  
 stone skin. I saved the Virgin's bathwater, carrying it back with me to the supply  
 closet. In the darkness, between the brooms and brushes, I drank that water like nectar.  
 It made me light-headed each time.

(*Lights down.*)

## Scene 7

*(Lights up on the inside of a Laundromat. JAEL is pulling laundry from the church out of the dryer. A man is folding his laundry at a table. MAGDELENA, a rumped woman in her 40s, is sitting watching him.)*

MAGDELENA

I'm cold.

*(The man continues to do his laundry without reacting. MAGDELENA stands and crosses over to the man.)*

I said, I'm cold.

*(The man continues to ignore her but JAEL turns to look at MAGDELENA briefly then turns back to her laundry.)*

If I had fifty cents, I could get some coffee. *(Beat.)* So cold.

*(She sticks her hand out like a small child. The man picks up his basket of folded laundry and exits. MAGDELENA wanders around the Laundromat. JAEL takes her basket over to a table and begins folding her clothes. Doing so, she catches MAGDELENA's eye. Instantly, MAGDELENA crosses over to JAEL.)*

I'm hot. If I had fifty cents, I could get a coke.

*(JAEL reaches into her pocket, pulls out change and places it in MAGDELENA's outstretched hand. MAGDELENA crosses over to the drink machine and gets a soda. She begins chugging it, getting most of it on her face and down her shirt. She crosses back over to JAEL.)*

MAGDELENA

You mad?

JAEL

Mad? At you?

MAGDELENA

*(Her chin quivers and she whispers.)*

I'm sorry.

JAEL

I'm not mad at all.



and *(MAGDELENA begins helping fold JAEL's laundry. JAEL pauses for a moment then pulls a holy cloth from the pile. She hands it to MAGDELENA.)*

Here. To wipe your face.

*(Lights down.)*

## Scene 8

*(Lights up on the inside of the church. There is a pile of wood lying off to the side. The sound of construction can be heard from offstage. JAEL is cleaning a large brass candleholder. The sound of construction stops. WALLACE enters. He is a thin man in his late 30s. He is wearing jeans, boots, and a flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He is covered in wood shavings and particles. WALLACE picks up one of the pieces of wood and then notices JAEL.)*

WALLACE

Miss?

*(JAEL turns around.)*

Do you work here?

*(JAEL motions to the brass cleaner and rags, rolls her eyes and nods. WALLACE laughs.)*

Sorry. Stupid question. I'm Wallace Mulhern. Been hired out for a pretty big job here. I guess you'll be seeing a lot of me.

*(JAEL nods and goes back to cleaning.)*

Um, I'm sorry to bother you but you don't know, by any chance, where I could get a broom, do you?

*(JAEL nods and crosses over to the supply closet. WALLACE follows.)*

I meant to bring my own broom, but I forgot it. I appreciate you letting me use yours.

JAEL

You stay out here.

*(JAEL goes into the closet and grabs the broom. She hands it to WALLACE and shuts the door.)*

WALLACE

Hey, did I do something to make you uncomfortable?

JAEL

Not really.

WALLACE

Because if I did, I didn't mean to.

*(JAEL begins crossing back over to the candleholder. WALLACE follows.)*

No kidding. I'm just doing my job. I made a mess and I wanted to clean it up.

JAEL

That's *my* job.

WALLACE

Well, okay. But I made the mess and I should clean it up. Don't you think?

*(He smiles hopefully. JAEL shrugs and goes back to cleaning the candleholder.)*

Aren't you going to tell me what I did that bugged you so much?

JAEL

No.

WALLACE

If you don't tell me, how do you know I won't do it again tomorrow?

JAEL

You will.

WALLACE

Not if you tell me what not to do.

JAEL

You just make a lot of noise. With all that sawing and hammering. You shouldn't do that here.

WALLACE

*(Pause.)*

You don't ever have to vacuum this place? That makes a lot of noise, I bet.

Jael

That's different. The vacuum keeps the floor clean. That's constructive noise.

Wallace

*(Playfully.)*

More constructive, say, than building new confessionals? More constructive than *building* something for Christ?

Jael

Okay, okay, I give up. *(Wallace laughs and Jael joins in.)* Really, though, it seems odd that you'd build them inside.

Wallace

Easier that way. They weigh a lot. It'd be a task to get them up the church steps and through the doors without skinning the woodwork.

Jael

Oh. I didn't think about that.

Wallace

So, I have your permission to continue with my efforts then?

Jael

*(Smiling.)*

Yes.

Wallace

Good. I'm gonna go clean up my mess now. It was nice meeting you...what did you say your name was?

Jael

I didn't. It's Jael.

Wallace

Well, nice meeting you, Jael. I'm sure I'll be running into you again soon.

*(He turns to exit.)*

Jael

What do you do with the pieces of wood you don't use?

Wallace

The scraps, you mean?

*(Jael nods.)*

Throw 'em away, usually. Why?

Jael

Would it be okay if I took a couple with me? I like to whittle.

Wallace

Really? What kind of knife do you use?

Jael

Um, just a regular kitchen knife. Is that okay?

Wallace

Hmmm. I've never whittled with a kitchen knife before. I usually use a pocketknife. Do kitchen knives work?

Jael

Sort of. I used to have a pocketknife, but I – I lost it. I don't know if a kitchen knife works as well.

Wallace

I do some carvings of my own. I'll show you sometime if you want. Don't live too far away.

Jael

That'd be good, I guess.

Wallace

Maybe come over for dinner or something.

Jael

Maybe.

Wallace

Good enough. Later.

*(He exits. Lights go down.)*

## Scene 9

*(Lights up on JAEL's basement apartment. JAEL is sitting whittling on a block of wood. Footsteps are heard in the adjacent room to her apartment. We hear the scraping of chairs on a floor and muffled voices. JAEL crosses to the wall and presses her ear against it as we hear the serenity prayer being said from next door: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference." JAEL remembers the hole that she plugged up earlier. She unplugs the hole and peers through. Lights up on the adjacent room. It is a classroom but all we can see is what JAEL sees – feet dangling from chairs.)*

MARGARET

Hi, my name is Margaret.

GROUP

Hi, Margaret.

*(JAEL returns to the block of wood and begins whittling again.)*

MARGARET

Last night I had another *fucking* dream. Just when I think I've dealt with everything, I have another fucking dream. This time I was swimming in the ocean, and when I tried to come up for air, a big fucking hand pushed my head back down. And no matter where I swam, the hand was there, and I couldn't breathe. And then I woke up. I don't know what it means. *(Pause.)* Of course I know what it means. *(Crying.)* It *means* that I'm *still* not over it. It means that at least in my sleep, I'm still vulnerable to him. Even though he's fucking dead. Goddamn him. *(Beat. Recovering.)* And I know why I had the dream. It's because my family's coming to visit this weekend, and I'm really fucking scared because they've never been to my house before – not since I moved here – and I'm worried that something will go wrong. They won't like my furniture, or they'll hate the foods in my fucking refrigerator. I thought it wouldn't bother me – for them to come here. My stepfather, died last year. But I realize that I don't want to see my *mother*. I'm so mad at her – still. *(Beat.)* Anyway, I'm glad to be here. I'm glad we have this new place to meet. It feels a lot safer to me. Thanks for listening, and I pass.

LUCY

Hi, I'm Lucy. I'm an incest survivor.

*(JAEL reacts to this.)*

GROUP

Hi, Lucy.

LUCY

I'm going back to school this semester. I dropped out eight years ago, so I'm a lot older than most of the other students, and I'm having a hell of a time getting back into the swing of things. One of the classes I'm taking, chemistry, it's really kicking my butt. I'm doomed in there. I'm failing that shit. *(Laughs.)* But I think the whole situation is really getting to me. I mean, I go to school in the morning and have to work until eleven every night. I don't know, man. I don't know if I can do it. I know this doesn't sound like it has much to do with sexual abuse, and maybe it doesn't. But when I'm under stress – like school stress or work stress or any fucking kind of stress – I start having flashbacks like mad. I mean, I can be sitting in the middle of that chemistry class, doing everything I can to keep my mind on the subject, and all of a sudden – *boom* – I'm twelve years old and locked in my brother's room all over again. So, the real problem I'm having – the one that's really scaring me, I mean – is that I'm having these urges, these *incredible* urges to hurt myself. I don't mean suicide or anything. I just keep wanting to burn myself with my iron. Sounds stupid, doesn't it? But I *do*. Or cut myself with...

*(JAEL plugs up the hole again. She climbs into bed and puts the pillow over her head. Lights down.)*

Scene 10

MAGDELENA

*(Off-stage.)*

Jael, come out.

*(Lights up on JAEL asleep in bed. It's night. She stirs.)*

Jael. Jael.

*(JAEL sits up and looks around in the dark.)*

The moon. Come look at the moon.

*(JAEL gets out of bed and puts on shoes and a hooded sweater.)*

Jael.

*(JAEL crosses over to her door and opens it. Lights up on a section of stage that represents outside. The woman from the Laundromat, MAGDELENA, is there. She has the holy cloth tied around her head like a scarf.)*

You almost missed it.

JAEL

Missed what?

MAGDELENA

Night. Come see the moon.

*(JAEL crosses over to her. MAGDELENA leads her over to a stream and they sit beside it watching the moon's reflection in the water.)*

JAEL

What's your name?

MAGDELENA

Mariah.

JAEL

What?

MAGDELENA

Madonna

JAEL

Who?

MAGDELENA

Magdalena. Come on.

*(MAGDELENA stands and starts splashing in the water.)*

You come. Get wet.

JAEL

It's cold.

MAGDELENA

Not under the moon. Get under the moon. Not under the man

*(MAGDELENA cackles to herself. JAEL stands and crosses down next to MAGDELENA.)*

Yes, yes, under the moon.

JAEL

*(Her teeth chattering.)*

Under the moon.

*(MAGDELENA begins spinning around in a circle. She motions JAEL to do the same.*

*The lights go down as the two women spin giddily, watching the glowing moon.)*

## Scene 11

*(Lights up on the inside of the church. JAEL is at the Madonna's altar. She begins replacing candles in the altar.)*

Hi, Mother Mary. I'm back to replace the candles in your altar.

*(JAEL takes the remnants of the other candles and puts the wax into a plastic bag which she puts back in her pocket.)*

VIRGIN MARY

You wouldn't have to work so hard if the parishioners would stop dying like flies. More people light candles for funerals than at any other time.

JAEL

Really? Who was the memorial for yesterday?

VIRGIN MARY

A man named Vernon Osgood. Arthur did an excellent job with his eulogy.

*(A shabbily dressed woman enters. JAEL leaves the VIRGIN MARY's altar and begins replacing candles throughout the rest of the church, paying little attention to the woman. The woman kneels in front of the VIRGIN MARY statue. JAEL glances over as the woman lifts her head and reveals a bloody gash on*



*her head. JAEL recognizes that it is MAMMIE. JAEL crosses over to Madonna's altar. The sound of a woman laughing is heard far away. JAEL submerges both hands into the bowl of holy water at the entrance to the shrine and splashes it on MAMMIE. MAMMIE disappears.)*

JAEL

She was evil.

VIRGIN MARY

No. There's no such thing.

JAEL

She hurt me. She didn't keep me safe.

VIRGIN MARY

But she taught you to recognize safe places. She taught you to see the powers around you.

JAEL

And I hurt her.

VIRGIN MARY

There's definitely too much hurt around here. But things aren't bad or good, Jael. They just *are*.

*(Lights down.)*

## Scene 12

*(Lights up on the inside of the church. WALLACE is on one side of the stage, finishing up one of the confessionals. JAEL is on the other side vacuuming.)*

WALLACE

The first one's together.

JAEL

*(Turning off the vacuum cleaner.)*

What?

WALLACE

I said the first one's done. Come see it.

*(JAEL crosses over to WALLACE.)*

What do you think?

JAEL

It's beautiful.

WALLACE

Want to try it out?

*(He opens one of the doors. JAEL steps inside, laughing. He opens the other door and steps in. They are separated by a screen.)*

Go ahead. *(Laughing.)*

JAEL

What am I supposed to say?

WALLACE

Say "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned."

JAEL

*(Giggling.)*

Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.

*(Pause.)*

WALLACE

I'm waiting.

JAEL

Waiting for what?

WALLACE

For you to tell me your sins.

JAEL

*(The mood changes. JAEL clutches herself and closes her eyes.)*

Wallace. Wallace, I can't do this.

Can't do what?

WALLACE

JAEL

*(Choking up.)*

I can't do this.

WALLACE

It's okay. You don't have to say anything. Why don't you be the priest? Is that okay?

JAEL

Uh-huh.

WALLACE

*(Quietly.)*

Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.

JAEL

I forgive you.

WALLACE

I'm having desires in a sacred place.

JAEL

Sometimes desires are sacred thoughts.

*(Pause.)*

It's my turn. Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.

*(Pause. No response.)*

Wallace, did you hear me? I said, "*Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.*" I wanted...I think I want –

*(Her voice breaks. She gasps for air. WALLACE opens her side of the confessional.)*

WALLACE

Could I just hold you?

*(He gathers JAEL in his arms. JAEL begins to cry. FLASHBACK: An eerie spot light comes up on one of the far sides of the stage. A girl, representing a YOUNG JAEL, stands in the half-light. The sound of heavy breathing and a loud, throbbing heartbeat is heard. An impending sense of doom. A MAN, indistinguishable, enters the half-light and looms over the YOUNG JAEL. They stand there, and the heartbeat sound continues, throughout the rest of the scene.)*

Jael, are you okay?

*(JAEL keeps her face buried in his chest and nods.)*

What's the matter? What's wrong?

JAEL

Just don't let go.

*(Sound fades and lights down as JAEL and WALLACE embrace.)*

### Scene 13

*(Light up on the bed in JAEL's apartment. She is asleep. Light up on another part of JAEL's apartment, revealing MAGDELENA.)*

MAGDELENA

Hi, I'm Magdalena. I'm an incest survivor.

JAEL

*(Still half-asleep.)*

Hi, Magdalena.

MAGDELENA

I've been having ideas. Not real ones. Made-up ones. I see a man in the Laundromat – hiding behind the washing machine. I slam his dick in the dryer. I slam it hard. *(She chuckles.)* I slam it.

JAEL

*(Turning over and burying her head under the pillow. Still half-asleep.)*

No, no. Leave me alone.

*(Lights down on MAGDELENA. Lights up on another part of JAEL's apartment, revealing MARIAH.)*

MARIAH

Hi. My name's Mariah, and I'm an incest survivor.

JAEL

*(Groggy, mumbling.)*

No, you can't do that. You can't interrupt until Magdalena passes.

*(JAEL wakes up more fully. She opens her eyes and sits up.)*

Hi, Mariah.

MARIAH

*(Smiling.)*

Hello. Today I've been having castration fantasies. I keep visualizing a man – hiding behind a tree. And I know he shouldn't be there. So in my fantasy, I grab his penis. I just grab it and pull him away to a pencil sharpener. And then I sharpen his penis like a pencil, and I draw him a picture with his own penis. It's a picture of my soul. The lines are so beautiful, but it's all bloody. And I make him look at it. And I say to him, "Look at this. Look at what you've done."

JAEL

*(Buries her head back under her pillow.)*

Stop. I can't. I can't listen

*(The lights go down on MARIAH. Lights come up on another part of JAEL's apartment, revealing the VIRGIN MARY in a red robe.)*

VIRGIN MARY

Hi, I'm Mary.

JAEL

Goodnight, Mary. I'm going to sleep now.

VIRGIN MARY

Hi, I'm Mary, and I'm an incest survivor.

*(Lights down.)*

## Scene 14

*(Lights up on JAEL's apartment. She is letting WALLACE in the front door. He is bearing gifts of flowers and wine. This is his first time visiting JAEL's domain. He hands JAEL his gifts.)*

JAEL

Wallace. You didn't have to bring me anything.

WALLACE

I know I didn't have to. I wanted to, silly

JAEL

Thank you.

*(WALLACE wanders around the apartment looking at the different things from nature JAEL has collected since living there – large sticks propped up against the wall, feathers on the dresser, little rocks and stones, etc.)*

WALLACE

My God. Your apartment is just like you.

JAEL

Is that a good thing?

WALLACE

It's a very good thing.

JAEL

*(JAEL crosses over to the stove to stir a pot on the stove.)*

I hope beef stew is okay for dinner.

WALLACE

It's perfect and it smells great. You cook much?

JAEL

I used to. But this apartment is so little that I don't fix big meals anymore.

WALLACE

And it's no fun cooking for one. I live by myself too. Except for Dante and Artemis. They're my cats. You have any pets?

Jael

I've never had a pet in my life. Actually, I had a turtle once. I kept him in a Lance cracker jar. His name was Sammy George Pickens – who knows how I came up with that one? When he died, I wrapped him in a dishrag, put him in a Mason jar, and threw him in the river. It took a long time for him to float out of my sight. The whole time his jar bobbed downstream, I sang church hymns. I think his funeral was the most fun we ever had together.

Wallace

You lived near a river before you came here?

*(Jael doesn't answer. She continues to stir the stew.)*

Wallace

Oh, I almost forgot! I brought you something. I left it outside.

Jael

Wallace, I told you you didn't have to bring me anything.

Wallace

*(Crossing over to the door.)*

I know. But I just couldn't help myself.

*(Wallace opens the door and retrieves a small wooden bench and a box.)*

Jael

Did you make that?

Wallace

*(Nods.)*

I use one of these when I'm working. I can't do woodwork when I'm sitting in a plastic chair. When I'm on wood, I can think like wood.

*(Jael nods as Wallace hands her the box.)*

And I thought these might work better than a kitchen knife.

*(Jael opens the box to reveal wood-working tools.)*

Jael

Wallace!

WALLACE

I thought you might want to make something.

JAEL

What would I make?

WALLACE

You'd have to figure it out for yourself.

*(JAEL sits down on the wooden bench. WALLACE sits down at her feet, his back pressing against her legs. JAEL places her hands tentatively on his shoulders.)*

So, talk to me.

JAEL

*(JAEL runs her fingers through WALLACE's hair.)*

Have you ever been married?

WALLACE

*(Chuckling.)*

*That* came out of nowhere, didn't it?

JAEL

*(Embarrassed.)*

I just wondered –

WALLACE

Yes, I've been married. But not since I moved here...

JAEL

Oh.

WALLACE

That was years ago, and it didn't last long. We got married because we thought we were supposed to. Thought we were in love, I guess. It just didn't work out.

JAEL

Sorry I asked.



WALLACE

*(He reaches for JAEEL's hand and pulls it over his shoulder, holding it.)*

It's okay. So tell me how you came to work in the church.

JAEEL

I – I was in an accident. And when I came to, I didn't remember anybody or anything. So someone helped me get this job, and I started all over.

WALLACE

My God. Jael. *(Beat. Whispering.)* I had no idea.

*(WALLACE pulls JAEEL down beside him. He takes her in his arms. They kiss. FLASHBACK: again the eerie spot light comes up on one of the far sides of the stage. YOUNG JAEEL stands in the half-light. The sound of heavy breathing and a loud, throbbing heartbeat is heard. An impending sense of doom. A MAN enters the half-light and looms over the YOUNG JAEEL.)*

JAEEL

Wallace.

*(The eerie spotlight goes down and the heartbeat sound stops.)*

WALLACE

Let's go to the bedroom.

JAEEL

No.

WALLACE

Why not?

JAEEL

No.

WALLACE

Only because it would be more comfortable. We can stop whenever you want. I promise.

JAEEL

Not the bedroom.

WALLACE

Okay.

*(He wraps his arms around JAEL.)*

Do you mind if I kiss you again?

*(JAEL brushes her lips across his neck. Her lips meander up his chin until they come to*

*rest on his. They kiss passionately. WALLACE pulls her to the floor.*

*FLASHBACK: the eerie spot light comes up on one of the far sides of the stage. YOUNG JAEL stands in the half-light. The sound of heavy breathing and a loud, throbbing heartbeat is heard. An impending sense of doom. A man enters the half-light and looms over the YOUNG JAEL - this time we can see that it is RIVER BILL.)*

RIVER BILL

Hi, I'm River Bill. Hi, I'm River Bill.

*(RIVER BILL continues sotto voce.)*

JAEL

*(As she quotes the serenity prayer, the spotlight begins to dim and the heartbeat sound begins to fade.)*

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.

*(WALLACE begins unbuttoning JAEL's shirt.)*

The courage to change the things I can.

*(WALLACE begins kissing down JAEL's chest towards her belly.)*

And the wisdom to know the difference.

*(The spotlight goes down, RIVER BILL stops his incantation, and the heartbeat noise ends as WALLACE's lips reach the big scar across JAEL's stomach.)*

WALLACE

Oh, God, Jael. What – *(He swallows hard.)* Does it hurt?

*(JAEL shakes her head "no." WALLACE reaches out and runs his fingers over the scar.)*

Jael

Did you know that skin could clump?

Wallace

Like cookie dough.

*(Wallace bends down and kisses it gently, brushing his lips along the thick seam. The lights go down.)*

Scene 15

*(Lights up on the inside of the church. Jael is cleaning the VIRGIN MARY statue. Arthur enters and comes bouncing over to Jael.)*

Arthur

Jael, my dear. How are you?

Jael

Fine. How are you?

Arthur

Very well. I got your note and thought that something must be wrong. What did you need to speak to me about?

Jael

Nothing's wrong. It's just that a friend of mine invited me on a weekend trip, and I was wondering if it'd be okay with you for me to take Friday afternoon and Saturday off. I'd be back by Sunday night.

Arthur

I think that sounds like a wonderful idea. What city will you visit?

Jael

The coast. I don't think I've ever seen the ocean before.

Arthur

Yes, yes. The ocean's beautiful – especially in winter. Everything's more beautiful in solitude.

Jael

Well, thank you, Father. I think I can get everything done by Friday afternoon if I work really hard.

ARTHUR

That would be fine. Just fine. (*Beat.*) Who is it you'll be vacationing with, dear, if you don't mind my asking?

JAEL

Wallace Mulhern, the carpenter who designed the new confessionals.

ARTHUR

With *Wallace*, Jael?

JAEL

Yes, Father.

ARTHUR

I see. (*Beat.*) Well, I hope you have an excellent time. Don't forget to clean the choir loft before you go. Luckily, they're practicing on Thursday this week instead of Saturday. Those choir members act like such Protestants sometimes, leaving their garbage all over the place. (*He winks and chuckles.*)

JAEL

Yes, Father.

(*ARTHUR exits.*)

JAEL

I think Arthur's upset with me

VIRGIN MARY

There's a part of Arthur that'd have you never leave the sanctuary, JAEL. You'd spend all your hours praying the prayers that someone else wrote. He's protective of you because he cares about you. But you're in no way obligated to live your life for him.

JAEL

I'm going away with Wallace, Mother. Is that a sin?

VIRGIN MARY

Only if it *feels* that way. Jael, look at me when I'm speaking to you. The only reason Arthur doesn't want you to travel with Wallace is because Arthur is afraid of love-making.

(*JAEL draws in a sharp intake of breath and looks away.*)

Don't look away. Arthur means well. He's a good man. But he doesn't know much about physical love-making. It makes him nervous. What the Church forgets to teach you is that you can't minister to the spirit alone. Don't neglect the body, Jael. Minister to the body as well.

Jael

*(Standing up. She doesn't see ARTHUR enter and cross over to her.)*

Yes, Mother. I'll bring you a seashell when I come back.

ARTHUR

You'll *what*?

Jael

I – uh, it was just a little prayer. You scared me.

ARTHUR

Sorry to interrupt you. You have a phone call in the office.

Jael

I do?

*(Jael turns back to look at the VIRGIN MARY, who gives her a reassuring wink.)*

Who is it?

ARTHUR

Helen Marston

*(Jael and ARTHUR begin to exit.)*

So, you've started praying, have you?

*(Lights down.)*

## Scene 16

*(Lights up. The beach. A tent. WALLACE is cooking breakfast over a small kerosene stove. It is early morning and cold. Jael is huddled under a blanket near the tent watching WALLACE.)*

WALLACE

You remember when you told me about your pet turtle – what was it? Sammy?

Jael

Sammy George Pickens. He went by all three names.

WALLACE

Did you remember that *after* your accident, or are there certain things that you just never forget?

Jael

*(Beat.)* It's hard to explain. I remember the turtle, but I don't remember much else.

WALLACE

Do you remember the house you lived in when you had Sammy George Pickens?

Jael

No.

*(She tries to stand but cannot.)*

Wallace.

*(FLASHBACK. Again the eerie spot light comes up on one of the far sides of the stage. YOUNG JAEL stands in the half-light. The sound of heavy breathing and a loud, throbbing heartbeat is heard. An impending sense of doom. RIVER BILL enters the half-light and looms over the YOUNG JAEL.)*

RIVER BILL

Hi, I'm River Bill. Hi, I'm River Bill.

*(RIVER BILL continues sotto voce. In the eerie spotlight, two men enter, CUSTOMERS from MAMMIE's store...they loom over YOUNG JAEL. One of them pushes her to her knees. MAMMIE also enters and stands over JAEL, watching.)*

JAEL V/O

Tell him you lied. Tell him you remember River Bill and the drunk men, Mammie's little head broken open and bloody. Tell him you remember hiding in the closet from the drunk men and Mammie's little broken head. Tell him you remember the quiet noises River Bill made – whee-zes, whee-zes, whee-zes – waking up to find him standing over you, watching your chest. Waking up to find Mammie hiding in your

closet, whee-zing, whee-zing. Waking up to find the drunk men, little zipper broken open, the taste of blood on your lips.

*(Flashback ends – light and sound ends abruptly.)*

WALLACE

Yeah?

JAEL

Can we make love now?

WALLACE

*(Beat.)* Do you want to eat first?

JAEL

No.

WALLACE

Oh.

*(He turns off the stove and crosses over to JAEL. He lays her down on the blanket and begins kissing her as the lights go down.)*

#### Scene 17

JAEL

We made love for the first time, there on the beach. And all I could hear was breathing – mine, Wallace's, the wind's, Mammie's, River Bill's, the trees', the breathing of spirits. And I could hear the sea. And I wept, cried, sobs broken by breaths stuck crossways in my throat. And even though Wallace held me tight, kissed the tears, my eyes, my soul plunged out through the bottoms of my feet, falling through the world's floor right into isolating blackness.

#### Scene 18

*(Lights up on Madonna's altar. JAEL is cleaning the statue of the VIRGIN MARY.)*

JAEL

Last night when I got home, I took all the seashells I'd collected from the beach and mixed them into the wax I've been saving up from your candles.

*(JAEL looks up to see if the VIRGIN MARY had become human again, but she remained a statue.)*

I molded it into a statue, a statue of a fat woman, and I put some Spanish moss on her head for hair. Here, see.

*(JAEL holds up the lumpy wax statue of the fat woman for the VIRGIN MARY to see, but the VIRGIN MARY still remains inert.)*

Well, anyway, this morning I remembered that I'd promised to bring one back for you. So, I looked at the statue and saw that her left breast was my favorite shell. I picked it out with my fingernail and brought it to you. Where should I put it?

*(She holds up the tiny brown shell. Again, no response from the VIRGIN MARY.)*

Here. I'll put it right here behind your foot. Can you feel it? It's just behind your heel.

*(JAEL stands. Before she leaves she kisses the VIRGIN MARY on the cheek. JAEL crosses over to another section of the stage. She looks at the little wax statue she made.)*

Do you know? Do you know where your lost nipple is? Here, I'll cover it up for you with your hair.

*(JAEL pulls a thick strand of moss over the wax figure's shoulder to cover the missing breast.)*

#### DARK WOMAN

What are you hiding it for? Too ugly for you? Hmmm?

*(JAEL moves away from the statue, startled.)*

Put it back. The hair. Put it back where you found it.

*(JAEL does as she's told.)*

How many times have you ever fixed a lie by hiding it? Ever?

#### JAEL

What?



DARK WOMAN

Think, think, think.

JAEL

I was just playing with your hair.

DARK WOMAN

Stop lying to yourself, Jael. You were covering up what you thought was a flaw. If there's one thing you've got to learn, is to appreciate the flaws. In flaws, you find the truth.

JAEL

The truth?

DARK WOMAN

Something you don't know much about yet. Lift up your shirt.

JAEL

What?

DARK WOMAN

Lift up your shirt.

JAEL

I don't even know who you are.

DARK WOMAN

It doesn't matter. You made me. Now lift up your shirt and take a look at that big, purple scar across your middle. Go ahead.

JAEL

Believe me, I know what it looks like.

DARK WOMAN

Don't be so difficult. I'm standing in front of *you* with one tit. So lift up your shirt and look at your scar.

*(JAEL lifts up her shirt, quickly looks at the scar and then pulls her shirt back down.)*

Touch it. Go ahead.

*(JAEL runs her fingertips over the scar.)*

Jael

I did it.

DARK WOMAN

I know.

Jael

I mean, I put it there – the scar.

DARK WOMAN

I know. You were honest back then – when you did that. (*Beat.*) Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that slicing yourself like a Thanksgiving goose is a good idea. But at least when you did it, you knew what you were feeling.

Jael

What?

DARK WOMAN

Think, think, think.

Jael

Who are you?

DARK WOMAN

You can call me Magic.

Jael

That's not a name. I can't call you that.

DARK WOMAN

Whatever. It's who I am.

*(Lights down.)*

## Scene 19

*(Lights up on Jael's apartment. Jael and Helen are having coffee while Jael describes her vacation at the beach. Helen keeps glancing at her watch nervously.)*

Jael

So, we ended up eating in restaurants most of the time because Wallace never did figure out how to make the kerosene stove work right. I told him we should have just built a fire and cook over that but he was being stubborn and –

HELEN

Jael, there's something I have to tell you.

JAEL

What is it?

HELEN

Arthur's worried about you, Jael. He's afraid about this whole relationship with Wallace – although he really does like Wallace. Umm – I don't know how to tell you this...He asked me to make an appointment for you with a gynecologist.

JAEL

*(Breathes in sharply. Panic.)*

Gynecologist?

HELEN

When he first talked to me about it – and believe me, it wasn't the highlight of my day either – he told me he thought you should have a routine check-up. Just to make sure you were okay. And since you can't remember your background, I thought it'd be a good idea too. Do you know if you've ever had a pelvic exam?

JAEL

*(Whispering.)*

No.

HELEN

No, you haven't, or no you don't remember?

JAEL

I don't know.

HELEN

Well, actually, I *think* that Arthur wants you to have the opportunity to get on birth control – if you want it. He can't say that outright, of course, since the Church doesn't endorse birth control. But I know that he believes in it. Now there's no reason to be embarrassed. These doctors see women all day long. I'll even go in with you if you want.

JAEL

No, I don't think so.

HELEN

Okay. So, anyway, your appointment's in an hour but we'll need to get there early to fill out the paperwork.

JAEL

It's today?

HELEN

Uh-huh. But not for a whole hour, so you've got plenty of time to finish your drink and ask me any questions.

JAEL

What if I don't *want* to go?

HELEN

Well, you certainly don't *have* to. I don't want you to feel like I'm making your choices for you. I just thought that this way would be easier. You wouldn't have to worry about it in advance.

JAEL

What makes you think I'd worry about it?

HELEN

You don't have to go, Jael. It's your decision. (*Beat.*) I don't mean to sway you one way or another. Arthur wants to make sure you have information – just knowledge about how your body works – so you'll be physically safe – and emotionally. If you go to the doctor, I think he'll back off, spend less time worrying over you and Wallace.

JAEL

Oh.

HELEN

Have you made up your mind?

JAEL

Doesn't feel like it's mine to make up.

HELEN

Jael –

*(JAEL stands and crosses towards the door. Lights down.)*

Scene 20

*(Lights up in a doctor's examining room. JAEL is in a paper gown. There is an examining table in the room but JAEL is not on it. The GYNECOLOGIST and a NURSE are also present.)*

GYNECOLOGIST

Do you have any questions or anything else you would like to tell me before we get started?

*(JAEL shakes her head "no.")*

Could you hop up on the table, please.

JAEL

Can't you do it with me standing up.

GYNECOLOGIST

That's impossible.

JAEL

Can you do it with me sitting in a chair.

GYNECOLOGIST

It won't take long. Really.

JAEL

Can I just sit up on the edge of the table?

GYNECOLOGIST

No, you see your feet need to fit into these stirrups. Here, I'll help you up. It really won't take long at all.

*(JAEL reluctantly allows the GYNECOLOGIST to help her up onto the table. The NURSE puts JAEL's feet into the metal stirrups and lays a blanket over her. JAEL is visibly uncomfortable. The GYNECOLOGIST sits in a rolling stool.)*

Now I'm going to do a Pap smear. That means that I take a sample of the tissue from your cervix and send it to the lab to make sure the cells are healthy.

*(The NURSE hands the GYNECOLOGIST a speculum and a swab.)*

I'll just insert this speculum and swab the lining.

*(The GYNECOLOGIST positions herself between JAEL's spread legs and begins her work. JAEL bolts upright.)*

JAEL

No!

*(JAEL jumps off the table.)*

GYNECOLOGIST

It was almost over.

JAEL

No, it wasn't.

*(Lights down as JAEL grabs her clothing and begins redressing.)*

## Scene 21

*(Lights up on the HELEN and JAEL sitting by the stream near the church.)*

HELEN

I screwed up. I should never have made the appointment without talking with you first. You have every right to be angry. *(Beat. JAEL doesn't respond.)* It'll probably make you feel better if you go ahead and release your anger. That's better than keeping it inside. *(Beat. Still no response.)* Please talk to me.

JAEL

I'm not mad, Helen.

HELEN

Of course you're mad. You have every right to be mad.

JAEL

I'm not *mad*. Not at you, anyway. I'm *mad* that she couldn't do the exam with me standing up. I'm *mad* at the people who make those stupid examining tables. I'm *mad* that she wouldn't let me stick the thing between my *own* legs. I would have let her look once I got it in.

HELEN

So what's the difference in being examined on a table and being examined standing up.

JAEL

I'm not sure but it feels different.

HELEN

I think you know.

JAEL

Know what?

HELEN

I think you know a lot. About lots of things. I think you know things you aren't telling.

JAEL

Arthur's an asshole.

HELEN

Why do you say that?

JAEL

I don't know. He just is. I can't tell when he's joking or when he's being serious.

HELEN

He's usually joking, unless he's giving a sermon. And sometimes he jokes then, too. It's his way of dealing with the world.

JAEL

I didn't know priests could do that.

HELEN

Joke? I think Arthur thinks being a Catholic is funny.

JAEL

But he's a priest.

HELEN

So what?

JAEL

*(Stands and begins tossing rocks into the stream.)*

He's supposed to be serious and spend his time instilling values in his congregation. Not sending me to a gynecologist.

HELEN

Jael, he didn't think of that as a joke. He surely didn't mean it to be hurtful. Just the opposite.

JAEL

I know. I'm being a jerk. I don't know why.

HELEN

I think I understand. But Arthur cares about you. He really does. And I think he wants the best for you.

JAEL

*(Tosses another rock into the stream.)*

I can hear them sinking.

HELEN

What?

JAEL

The rocks. I can hear them sinking. Can you?

*(She tosses another one in for HELEN to hear.)*

HELEN

No. What does it sound like?

JAEL

Real faint. Like pinching your neck and exhaling. *(Beat. She sits back down.)* Do you think I'm crazy?

HELEN

For what?

JAEL

Just generally crazy. Like for thinking rocks make noises on their way down. Do you think that's nutty?

HELEN



I don't know.

Jael

But you're supposed to know. You're a shrink.

Helen

I'm a social worker. Big difference. Plus, I'm just getting started. So don't put too much pressure on me. *(Laughs.)*

Jael

Do you think it's crazy to talk to things that aren't alive?

Helen

Maybe.

Jael

Because they can't hear, right? Like this rock. When I say, "Good-bye, rock. Have a nice trip down," it can't know what I mean, can it? It can't feel what I'm wishing, right? It can't talk back. So am I crazy? *(Beat.)* Like the moon, Helen. Didn't you ever talk to the moon?

*(Helen shakes her head "no.")*

So if I ask the moon questions and believe I hear answers, am I crazy?

Helen

You know, most people would probably call you crazy. But wise spirits take their chances.

*(Lights down.)*

## Scene 22

*(Lights up on Jael's apartment. Jael and Wallace are both working on separate wood-working projects.)*

Wallace

So you can't remember anything from your past?

Jael

No. I told you. Nothing.

WALLACE

What about your parents?

JAEL

*(Through clenched teeth.)*

What about them?

WALLACE

Well, do you remember them?

JAEL

No.

WALLACE

But you remember your turtle, Sammy George Pickens. Right? *(No response.)* How about old boyfriends?

JAEL

I can't remember.

WALLACE

If you try really hard, can you recall feelings – or sensations – anything?

JAEL

No. For all I know I could have been a hooker.

WALLACE

You're such a bitch sometimes.

JAEL

Do you think you could find a little empathy anywhere in your thick head? I may have *been* a hooker. I wasn't kidding.

WALLACE

*(Throwing down his woodworking tool.)*

You weren't a hooker, damn it.

JAEL

You can't know that.

WALLACE

Whoever you were, whatever you were, you still had the same body, the same mind, the same ways. You're the same person, without the memories. And you aren't the kind of person who would have been a hooker. So shut up about it.

JAEL

I could have been. There are all kinds of hookers.

WALLACE

*(Pause. WALLACE crosses over to JAEL and sits beside her. He puts his arm around her. She doesn't pull away.)*

Do you think you can ever be happy –without your memory, I mean?

JAEL

I'm happy now.

WALLACE

I'm sorry I keep asking questions. I just keep hoping...

JAEL

I know.

*(A knock at the door.)*

WALLACE

Pizza's here. Hold that thought.

*(He exits out the front door.)*

JAEL

*(To audience.)*

Something he said hung around in my air. The part about being a person without memories. I had memories, of course. Plenty of them. But for the first time I realized that *that* was what I'd wanted when I arrived at the hospital. No memories. Nothing to remind me. But no matter how hard I try, I can't forget. So, everyday I have to pretend...no, lie. Everyday I have to lie. *(She starts to cry.)* How can I lie to him when he's so open with me?

*(JAEL breaks down and begins sobbing. WALLACE re-enters with a pizza box and sees JAEL huddled crying on the floor.)*

WALLACE

I'll be right back.

*(He exits. We hear running water. He returns with a wet washcloth. He crosses over to JAEL and helps her sit up.)*

Easy.

JAEL

I'm sad.

WALLACE

It's okay. I'm right here.

JAEL

These dreams. Sometimes I get them.

WALLACE

Lie back.

*(He guides JAEL to lay her head on his lap.)*

You just need to slow down.

JAEL

Sometimes you're in them. With all the other men. You're just like them.

WALLACE

In the dreams.

JAEL

Sometimes.

WALLACE

Slow down.

*(He reaches for the washcloth and wipes it across JAEL's face. FLASHBACK: the eerie spot light comes up on one of the far sides of the stage. YOUNG JAEL stands in the half-light. The sound of heavy breathing and a loud, throbbing heartbeat is heard. An impending sense of doom. One of MAMMIE's CUSTOMERS enters the half-light and looms over the YOUNG JAEL. He pushes her to her knees.)*

JAEL (V/O)

Wet on my face, rag on my face, scrub my lips right off, no way to talk, no way to scream, wash my lips right off my dirty mouth. Wormy-eyed old man, stubbled chin, cuts his shirttail, wets it, scrubs my mouth. Water hose squirts, swish and spit. Squeezes shirttail, wipes my lips off. Scrubs mouth, eyes, mouth, rough and fast. Wipes my words away. No lips to hold my words.

*(JAEL bolts upright, arms flailing and the flashback ends.)*

WALLACE

Hold on. Jael, what is it?

JAEL

Not my face.

WALLACE

Okay. I'm sorry.

*(JAEL is crying and gasping for air. She grabs WALLACE's hand and clenches it tight.)*

You're scaring me. You have to tell me what's going on.

JAEL

I want you.

WALLACE

You have me.

JAEL

No, I mean I *want* you. Now.

*(WALLACE stands and crosses away from JAEL. He looks at JAEL and smiles, but he is about to cry.)*

WALLACE

No. I can't make love. Not when I don't understand what's behind it.

*(JAEL buries her face into the crevice between her knees and sobs.)*

We have to talk. Will you talk?

*(No response. JAEL doesn't look up. WALLACE crosses over to her and gets down beside her on the floor.)*

Will you *talk* to me? (*Crying.*) Can you at least try?

*(JAEL reaches out and WALLACE wraps her in his arms. She buries her face in his chest.)*

JAEL

I lied. I don't have amnesia. I never did.

WALLACE

What? Why did –

JAEL

Wait. Please, just wait. I'll tell you everything if you just wait.

WALLACE

*(Whispering.)*

Okay.

JAEL

I lived with my Mammie and helped her run her store until she died when I was twelve. And then a deacon from the local church took me in. I lived with him and helped him run his store until I ran away last year.

WALLACE

Why did you leave?

JAEL

I didn't want to be his wife. You understand?

WALLACE

Jael.

JAEL

Don't look at me. (*Beat.*) I left when a boy wanted to take me for a ride in his boat. I didn't plan on leaving for good – or maybe I did, I don't know. But we rode for miles and miles and then landed at this secluded place on the river. And after he – well, anyway, the next morning he left me there. Just took the boat and left.

WALLACE

Son of a bitch.

JAEL

I didn't know where I was. And frankly, I didn't much care at that point. I found this tree that had been struck by lightening, and part of it was unearthed, so I lived under there. And I caught fish and trapped small animals to eat. Till one day three women set up camp near where I was. I was real sick at that point. The cuts I'd made were starting to get infected and they found me and took care of me until the paramedics arrived. But when the paramedics got there, they said there were no other people there. That the women weren't there. Nobody believed they were real. But I know they were.

WALLACE

I love you.

JAEL

Do you believe me, though?

*(She finally turns to look at him. He nods his head "yes" then rubs his hand over JAEL's scar on her midsection.)*

WALLACE

Why'd you cut yourself up?

JAEL

To pour the poison out.

WALLACE

What poison?

JAEL

I don't know, exactly. That's just how I think of it.

WALLACE

So you created the whole story – about losing your memory.

JAEL

I didn't want to go back.

WALLACE

You don't have to go back.

JAEL

Will it be the same, now that you know?

WALLACE

*(He takes her back into his arms.)*

No.

Jael

Wallace.

Wallace

It's okay.

Jael

Promise.

Wallace

I promise.

*(Lights down.)*

### ACT III

#### Scene 1

*(Lights up on the outside of the part of the church that leads to the Incest Survivor Group. Jael is outside the door sweeping the steps. She has one of WALLACE's sweatshirts tied around her waist.)*

Jael

Every Wednesday night they had their meetings. And every Wednesday night I had to listen. But tonight I needed to see their faces. I needed to know the shape of their noses, the texture of their skin. So I waited until they approached...and watched them enter one by one. I couldn't get over how typical they looked. They could have been at church for choir practice. They could have been mothers waiting for their children to return from youth group. There was nothing separating them from any other woman I had ever met. Except they all carried stuffed animals. I memorized their shoes. I recognized the angle of their slumps. *(Beat. Sits down.)* Instead of listening to their meeting from inside my apartment, I sat outside the door they entered. I wondered what it would be like to be inside with them. I wondered what I would say to them – "Hi, my name is Jael, and I've been listening to your for months." Or maybe, "Hi my name is Jael, and I already know the things you dream."



*(She unties the sweatshirt, balls it up and holds it in her lap. She is lost in thought and does not notice ARLENE enter. ARLENE is small, skinny, sprightly older woman. She is clutching a Winnie-the-Pooh in her arms.)*

Hi, my name is Jael, and I'm an incest survivor. Hi, my name is Jael, and sometimes I get too scared to move. Hi, my name is Jael, and I cut myself up for kicks. Hi, my name is Jael, and I've lied to everybody.

ARLENE

They move the meeting outside?

JAEL

Huh?

ARLENE

Don't you think you ought to take those feelings to the meeting?

JAEL

*(Whispering.)*

Umm, I'm not going to the meeting.

ARLENE

Okay. But you made it this far. You sure you don't want to come in with me?

JAEL

It's almost over.

ARLENE

There's thirty minutes left. If you get here late, you can still go in.

JAEL

Oh.

*(ARLENE crosses to the door to go in but stops and turns back to JAEL.)*

ARLENE

You okay?

*(JAEL nods "yes.")*

You want to be alone?

*(JAEL shrugs as her body begins to tremble.)*

JAEL

*(Her voice shaking.)*

Why would anyone want to do this to me?

ARLENE

*(Sitting down beside JAEL.)*

It gets easier. *(Beat.)* Do you mind if I sit here with you for a while?

*(JAEL shakes her head “no.”)*

I’ve been coming to these meetings since they first started, oh, about four years ago, I guess. You ever been to a survivor’s meeting before?

*(JAEL shakes her head “no.”)*

I didn’t think so. Think I could get you to tell me your name?

JAEL

Jael.

ARLENE

Jael? I never heard that one before. I’m Arlene.

JAEL

Nice to meet you.

ARLENE

So what are you doing sitting on the church steps for? Did you lose your nerve?

JAEL

I guess you could say that. Really, I didn’t intend to go at all this time. I wanted to look at the people first. To see what they looked like before I went in.

ARLENE

Why does it matter?

JAEL

I don’t know. I – I guess maybe...I don’t know.

ARLENE

It's always hard – the first time. Then you get used to it. You meet some people, get their phone numbers, even start going to the movies together.

JAEL

Do you know all those people?

ARLENE

Most of them. Same old ones come about every week. Every now and then somebody new will show up.

JAEL

I don't know if I'd have anything to say.

ARLENE

Oh, I'll bet you'd have plenty to say. You were saying a whole lot when I walked up on you tonight. You might not want to say it at first, but sooner or later, you'll find the words. They come to you after a while.

JAEL

I already know the opening prayer.

ARLENE

Well, that's a start. I tell you what. You can go with me next week. I'll pick you up and then I can introduce you to the others, so you won't feel like such an outsider. How does that sound?

JAEL

Okay.

ARLENE

Good. Let me give you my phone number, and if you need to talk during the week, you just call.

*(ARLENE pulls a piece of paper and pen out of her bag and writes down her number.)*

JAEL

Thank you.

ARLENE

Call anytime.

JAEL

Will you be the one who answers?

ARLENE

If I don't, just ask for me.

JAEL

Will it make your husband mad?

ARLENE

No husband. Nobody's going to get mad with you. Just call.

JAEL

You don't even know me.

ARLENE

I probably know you better than you think.

*(Lights down.)*

## Scene 2

*(Lights up on JAEL's apartment. Again, he and JAEL are working on two separate projects. JAEL is making a drum by hollowing out the inside of a stump, WALLACE a chair.)*

WALLACE

So did you tell Helen yet?

JAEL

I haven't seen her this week.

WALLACE

Jael, I told you to call her. You need to talk about all this stuff with somebody qualified.

JAEL

I don't want to tell her. Do you think this would work better if I burned the inside out?

WALLACE

Oh, no, you don't. You're not changing the subject on me. You need to talk to a woman about this, and I'm not leaving you alone until you do.

Jael

Why does it have to be a woman?

Wallace

Why do you have to be so hard to get along with? You're just trying to pick a fight. It doesn't have to be a woman. I figured you'd rather talk with a woman. Go talk to Arthur if you want – or anybody else. I don't care.

Jael

I talk to you. Doesn't that count?

Wallace

I don't know how to help you. Haven't you figured that out yet? I don't have a clue about what you need to do to work through all this stuff. Did you go to that meeting?

Jael

I tried.

Wallace

What do you mean, you tried?

Jael

I got scared and couldn't go in.

Wallace

Jael –

Jael

You don't know what it's like, Wallace. Don't yell at me.

Wallace

I'm not yelling. It's just so frustrating. I told you I'd go with you, and you said no. And then you didn't go either.

Jael

You can't go. The meetings are just for women, and besides that, they're closed. And if you'd give me time, I'd tell you that I sat on the doorsteps during the whole thing and met a woman who's taking me with her next week so I won't feel so damned stupid.

Wallace

You don't have any reason to feel stupid.

Jael

Go fuck yourself.

*(She vigorously hollows out the stump. WALLACE watches her. Long silence.)*

Wallace

*(Quietly.)*

I'm so scared for you.

Jael

Well, don't be. I've already lived through the hard part. There's nothing bad going on in my life right now. Nothing at all.

Wallace

So what's your plan.

Jael

I need to go to the river.

Wallace

Why?

Jael

I don't know yet.

Wallace

Are you sure?

Jael

I think so.

Wallace

Come here.

*(Jael puts down the stump and crosses over to WALLACE. They hug.)*

You have to be honest with me, you know.

Jael

I am being honest.

Wallace

I mean really honest. More honest than you've ever been. You have to tell me exactly how you feel.

Jael

I already do.

Wallace

Like right now. What's going on in your head when I hold you this way?

Jael

It feels just fine. No lie.

*(Lights down.)*

### Scene 3

*(Lights up on Jael's apartment. She is sitting in her rocking chair, nervously checking her watch. The Dark Woman is still on the mantel.)*

Dark Woman

Are you nervous?

Jael

A little.

Dark Woman

Your coloring's bad.

Jael

So's yours.

Dark Woman

You have nothing to be nervous about, you know. You've practically been a part of the group for months.

Jael

I know.

Dark Woman

Why don't you open up the hole? Then if you need to, you can look at it and see how close you are to being home.

*(JAEL goes and pulls the cloth out of the hole in the wall. Then she stacks some books onto the floor in front of it, lifts the Dark Woman from the mantel, and sets her on top of the books.)*

JAEL

Don't you move.

DARK WOMAN

I won't go anywhere.

*(A knock is heard at the door.)*

You'll be fine.

*(Lights down as JAEL goes to answer the door.)*

#### Scene 4

*(Lights up on the classroom of the Incest Survivor group meeting. Four or five women are sitting around in a circle chatting quietly. JAEL and ARLENE enter. ARLENE dumps a box of stuffed animals onto the carpet.)*

ARLENE

Want an animal?

*(A few of the women, even those who had already brought their own, reached down and grabbed a toy.)*

JAEL

No, thanks.

*(JAEL bunches up WALLACE's sweatshirt and hugs it to her. Two or three more women come in and sit.)*

GROUP LEADER

We have a newcomer. *(She passes JAEL a piece of paper.)* Here's our "Welcome to Newcomers" pamphlet, I hope you'll read it. All right now. Let's begin, shall we. Arlene, would you like to start us off.

ARLENE

God grant me...



*(The rest of the women join in.)*

GROUP

The serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can;  
and wisdom to know the difference.

TERRI

Hi, my name is Terri.

GROUP

Hi, Terri.

TERRI

Hi. I haven't been to a meeting in a long time – almost a year. I've been doing really well with my recovery. But tonight I was in my house, in my pajamas, about to turn on the TV, and I thought about you guys and how much I missed you. So I came out tonight just to check in. And I'm really glad to have this place to return to. It feels like home. And that's all I need to say. I pass.

OLIVIA

Hi, I'm Olivia.

GROUP

Hi, Olivia.

OLIVIA

I had something very upsetting happen.

*(OLIVIA begins to cry. Someone picks up a box of tissues and passes it to her.)*

I had to leave my husband this week because I found out he's been molesting my little girl.

*(She breaks down and begins to sob.)*

I hadn't even *noticed*, as well as I knew the signs.

*(JAEL looks to the hole in the wall where the Dark Woman waited. The DARK WOMAN appears, but is only visible to JAEL.)*

JAEL

*(To the DARK WOMAN and herself; no one else hears her.)*

I have to leave. I can't listen to this.

DARK WOMAN

It belongs to you, too. Stay with it.

*(OLIVIA continues to sob. ARLENE wraps her arms around her in comfort.  
The VIRGIN MARY next to the DARK WOMAN.)*

JAEL

*(To the VIRGIN MARY.)*

Go to her!

VIRGIN MARY

She isn't ready yet.

JAEL

Can't you do anything?

VIRGIN MARY

There's a time for this sort of passion, Jael. Olivia is in the right place to exorcise these feelings.

JAEL

Well, what are you doing here, then?

VIRGIN MARY

I'm here for you. You're the one who called. Breathe.

JAEL

*(Taking in a deep breath)*

What can I do to help her?

VIRGIN MARY

Just stay.

*(Lights down.)*

Scene 5

*(Lights up on JAEL's apartment. JAEL is stretching out a piece of deerskin over her hollowed out stump to make a drum. WALLACE is in the kitchen making pizza – he is spreading the dough across the pan.)*

JAEL

Wallace, will you do that to my back?

WALLACE

Do what to your back?

JAEL

Push on it like you're doing to that dough.

WALLACE

Do you have any idea how bad you are at flirting? *(Laughing. He holds up his dough covered hands.)* Do you really want these hands touching you?

JAEL

I don't care.

WALLACE

You asked for it.

*(WALLACE begins walking towards JAEL like a monster, his gooey dough-covered hands outstretched. JAEL squeals and, laughing, runs away from him. WALLACE follows her into the living room, around chairs, tables, the sofa, etc.)*

JAEL

Don't touch me. *(Laughing.)* You'll get that all over me.

WALLACE

I thought you didn't care.

JAEL

I changed my mind.

*(WALLACE catches up, grabs her around the waist, and pulls her to the floor. He flips her over onto his back and pins her down. They are both giggling.)*

WALLACE

Is this what you wanted?

JAEL

*(Giggling.)*

Let me up.

WALLACE

No way. It'd be too much trouble to catch you again.

JAEL

Really, Wallace.

WALLACE

Uh-uh.

JAEL

*(Still laughing a bit.)*

Please. Please let me go.

WALLACE

I want to keep you here all night.

*(He lowers himself down to kiss her. FLASHBACK: the eerie spot light comes up on one of the far sides of the stage. YOUNG JAEL stands in the half-light. The sound of heavy breathing and a loud, throbbing heartbeat is heard. An impending sense of doom. RIVER BILL enters the half-light and looms over the YOUNG JAEL. )*

JAEL

*(Starting to panic.)*

No. Let me up.

*(JAEL pushes WALLACE off her with all her might. The flashback ends.)*

WALLACE

What is it?

*(JAEL sits up shaking and starts to cry.)*

My God, I thought we were playing.

JAEL

We were.

WALLACE

What happened?

JAEL

I don't know.

WALLACE

*(Taking JAEL by her shoulders.)*

Think. Tell me when it stopped being a game for you.

*(JAEL tries to respond but the sobs choke her words.)*

When I chased you around the living room? Were you scared then?

JAEL

That was *fun*.

WALLACE

Was it when I grabbed you?

JAEL

*(JAEL shakes her head "no.")*

When you held me down. Not until you held me down.

WALLACE

I thought that was the point.

JAEL

It *was*.

WALLACE

But I scared you.

JAEL

Not *you*. It wasn't *you*.

*(JAEL buries her face in WALLACE's chest. He wraps his arms around her.)*

WALLACE

What was it then?

JAEL

*(Whispering.)*

I was on my back. I thought it was another time.

*(Lights down.)*

Scene 6

*(Lights up on the stream by the church. JAEL and HELEN are sitting side by side.)*

JAEL

And so the paramedics came in a helicopter and took me to the hospital. That's when I made up the story about having amnesia. *(Beat.)* I'm sorry I wasn't up front with you about the things from my past.

HELEN

Well, to tell you the truth I have had my suspicions about what you remembered and what you didn't. Not at first, though. When you were in the hospital and even after you'd started working at the church, I thought I was dealing with a full-blown case of amnesia. But after a while, I noticed that you weren't particularly worried about remembering. With amnesia, most patients work very hard to recover their memories. They get frustrated that they can't remember their pasts. They visit places that they think might help them recall something. They make lists of things they're good and bad at. And they're under a different kind of stress than you've exhibited. So I figured out a good while back that whatever you had going on in your hard head was something besides amnesia.

JAEL

I didn't mean to lie, exactly. But I knew that if I told you the place I was from, you'd send me there again.

HELEN

Do you ever cry about it?

JAEL

Sometimes. Why?

HELEN

Because you deliver that story like it's rehearsed, like you've repeated it to yourself so many times that you don't feel it anymore.

Jael

Of course I feel it.

HELEN

Really? Tell me when you *feel* it.

Jael

I feel it – well, there's this room next to my apartment where these women have incest survivor meetings every Wednesday night. I've been going...

HELEN

Good. I didn't know that.

Jael

So I feel it there. And sometimes when I'm with Wallace...usually everything's okay. But sometimes, I see things – or even hear things from a long time ago.

HELEN

When does it happen?

Jael

Helen –

HELEN

No, I'm serious. I need to know. Is it when you're being sexual?

Jael

Yeah, I feel it then.

HELEN

That's pretty standard for sexual abuse victims in general.

Jael

Sexual abuse *survivors*. That's what they call it in the group. We're no longer victims, we're survivors. Who cares. It *all* sounds so clinical – another language of oppression. Victims, survivors, robots.

HELEN

I'm glad you told me. I hope you feel safe about it. I hope you trust me enough to know that I won't break confidences.

JAEL

But you'll tell Arthur, right?

HELEN

No. I won't tell anyone at all. Not without your permission.

JAEL

Good, because I don't want Arthur to know. It'd make things uncomfortable.

HELEN

I won't say a word.

*(Silence. JAEL begins tossing pebbles into the stream.)*

I heard it sink.

JAEL

You *did*?

HELEN

I think so.

*(Lights down.)*

### Scene 7

*(Lights up on JAEL's apartment. JAEL is standing in her underwear in front of a full-length mirror. She is examining the scars left on her body. The Dark Woman is watching from her place on the mantel.)*

JAEL

What was I thinking? Check this out. I tried to tattoo myself with berries and pine needles and some of it actually worked.

*(She points out the bluish dots on her arm.)*

DARK WOMAN

You were doing what you need to do then. Claiming yourself. It wasn't a bad thing.

JAEL



I don't think they look like flaws anymore. They look more like – like scars. See here where I carved my name?

DARK WOMAN

You ever feel like cutting at yourself anymore?

JAEI

I don't think so. I haven't done it in a while.

DARK WOMAN

It was a stage. People go through them all the time. Like me. I'm a stage for you right now. You use me while you need me, and then you move on to something else.

JAEI

*(Turning to the Dark Woman.)*

I'm not going to leave you.

DARK WOMAN

Sure you will. But do you remember what you were feeling when you slashed yourself up?

JAEI

Yeah.

DARK WOMAN

Well, when I'm gone, you'll remember what you felt when we had our little talks. I don't know what you're whining about anyway. You never especially liked me.

JAEI

I like you. I just think you're nasty sometimes.

DARK WOMAN

Whatever.

JAEI

Where are you going?

DARK WOMAN

Wherever you take me.

JAEI

I'm not taking you anywhere. I'm leaving your mean little body right on that mantel.

*(Lights down.)*

Scene 8

*(Lights up on JAEL's apartment. She is dressed in blue jeans, a sweatshirt, and hiking boots. She is packing a backpack with clothing, a sketchpad, pens, etc. HELEN is sitting in a chair watching her.)*

HELEN

Do you know where you're headed to?

JAEL

Well, I called the hospital and the rescue squad trying to find out the exact location where they found me. It's some place called Bitterroot Landing and, evidently it's in the middle of nowhere. Wallace has some maps and we marked where we think the area is, so we shouldn't have too much trouble finding it.

HELEN

Be prepared for some strong emotions. You've got all sorts of feelings tied up in that place.

JAEL

I think I'm ready.

HELEN

You're in good hands with Wallace. Are you excited?

JAEL

Pretty much, yeah. He's late.

HELEN

You can call me, you know, if you need to.

JAEL

I might have to hike out a ways – to get to telephone.

HELEN

Well, that's been done before.

*(A knock is heard at the door.)*

And that would be Wallace. I'll get it on my way out.

Jael

Thanks.

*(HELEN opens the door to WALLACE.)*

WALLACE

Helen. How's it going?

*(He enters.)*

HELEN

Hi, Wallace. I was just waiting with Jael until you arrived. I'm going to let myself out. Listen, you two have a good trip, okay? I'll be thinking about you. Jael, remember to call me if you need me.

Jael

I will. And thank you.

*(She crosses over and gives HELEN a hug. HELEN exits.)*

WALLACE

*(Picking up Jael's backpack.)*

This all you're taking?

Jael

Yep.

WALLACE

All right, let's do it.

*(He moves towards the door.)*

Jael

Wait. There's one thing.

*(She runs to the mantel, grabs the Dark Woman statue, and tucks her into the backpack.)*

Okay, now I'm ready.

*(Lights down as the two exit.)*

Scene 9

*(Lights up on JAEL and WALLACE walking through a swamp carrying their supplies on their backs. WALLACE is leading the way.)*

WALLACE

How far do you think till we reached Bitterroot Landing?

JAEL

I don't know. Let me see the map.

WALLACE

*(Handing her the map.)*

I think we're here.

*(Points to a place on the map. JAEL looks at the map for a moment.)*

Does any of this look familiar?

JAEL

No, but it feels right. *(Beat.)* You do know what to do if you see an alligator, don't you?

WALLACE

Are you serious?

JAEL

Well, we're in a swamp.

WALLACE

What?

JAEL

Throw your pack at it and run the other way.

WALLACE

That makes sense.

Jael

Or climb a tree. It takes an alligator a while to climb a tree.

Wallace

Good to know.

*(Jael reaches for Wallace's hand.)*

You okay?

Jael

A little nervous. A little shaky but excited. Except sometimes I get scared that the place I remember doesn't exist.

Wallace

You think you made it up?

Jael

No, I don't think so. It's just really important to find it because sometimes it's hard for me to keep straight what happened in real life and what happened in my mind. Like – I wonder sometimes if I lived beneath that tree for as long as I think I did. I wonder if maybe I was only there for one night and maybe everything else that I remember was a hallucination or something.

Wallace

Hmmmmm.

Jael

It's all tied together. Like when I have memories or flashbacks and dreams. They're all different, and then I can't remember how it actually happened. You know?

Wallace

I think so. But do you think it matters?

Jael

What do you mean?

Wallace

Does it make any difference what really happened? I mean, if you have a flashback that scares you, whether or not it happened the way you remember it, you're still scared, right?

Jael

Yeah.

WALLACE

So why would it matter whether your memories are accurate?

JAEL

Because if the memories aren't real, then maybe I'm not either.

WALLACE

What I'm saying, Jael, is that it shouldn't matter to you if you don't find this particular tree that you slept under. Because whether we find it or not, it's real to you.

JAEL

But it isn't real to *you*, yet. And I'm going to take you there.

*(Lights down.)*

#### Scene 10

*(Lights up on a river bank with a beach lined with tall grass and trees. On one side of the stage there is a tin camper. On another part of the stage, in a separate area than the camper, there is a huge tree that had been pushed over during a storm. This is Bitterroot Landing. JAEL and WALLACE enter. When JAEL sees where she is, she lets out a yelp, kicks off her boots, throws down her backpack and runs to the river.)*

WALLACE

*(Laughing as JAEL splashes in the water.)*

I take it that you know this place?

JAEL

Oh, *yeah*.

WALLACE

Welcome home.

*(He takes off his boots, rolls his jeans up to the knees and wades into the river to join JAEL.)*

Whoa, it's cold.

JAEL

*(Giggling.)*

What'd you expect.

WALLACE

Who does the trailer belong to?

JAEL

Don't know.

WALLACE

Did you stay here before?

JAEL

Not for long. But I know where I am. I wasn't wrong.

WALLACE

Is this where – is this where Thompie Hayes left you?

JAEL

Yes.

*(WALLACE crosses over to JAEL and embraces her.)*

I need to sleep here tonight. On the ground. With you.

WALLACE

Jael.

JAEL

Please. I need to sleep in the sand, and when I wake up, I need you to be here.

WALLACE

I'll be here. I promise.

*(Lights down.)*

## Scene 11

*(The next morning. Lights up on the camper area. JAEL is putting things in her pack – the Dark Woman statue, a knife, and matches.)*

WALLACE

What if something happens?

JAEL

Nothing will happen. Stay here and fish.

WALLACE

I thought you wanted to show me the place.

JAEL

I do, but not right now. I have to go there first on my own.

WALLACE

When will you be back?

JAEL

Later today. And I need you to be here. Swear that you won't leave.

WALLACE

I swear.

*(He takes her face in his hands and kisses her.)*

Suppose I need you. How can I find you?

JAEL

There's a path through those trees – I'm going that way. The walk is about fifteen minutes. That's all. But don't come.

WALLACE

If you aren't back by dusk, I'll look for you.

JAEL

Okay, but not before.

*(She starts off.)*

WALLACE

Be careful.

JAEL

You too.



WALLACE

Watch out for snakes.

JAEL

It's under control.

WALLACE

I'll miss you.

JAEL

Yeah, right.

*(Lights down as she exits.)*

## Scene 12

*(Lights up on the upturned tree. JAEL is cleaning out the crevice. The Dark Woman statue is sitting on the leaning trunk.)*

JAEL

It feels okay to be here.

DARK WOMAN

This was the safest place for you for a while.

JAEL

*(Straddles the tree beside the Dark Woman.)*

This is the place where I marked up my body. Sitting right here.

DARK WOMAN

What do you need to do – now that you're back in this place?

JAEL

I don't know.

DARK WOMAN

Think.

*(JAEL strips off her clothes and places them away from the mothering tree. She then gathers stones and rocks and builds a small altar, a monument of sorts.)*

Jael

To honor the pain in the world.

DARK WOMAN

Yes. Now honor the women whose spirits touched you, made you who you are.

Jael

*(Stretching out on the tree, looking into the sky.)*

I don't know how.

DARK WOMAN

Yes, you do.

Jael

I call upon – I call upon the three women who rescued me –Caroline, Mariah, Amy.

*(One by one, CAROLINE, AMY, and MARIAH enter. They are enveloped in an ethereal glow. They go to Jael and kiss the scarred places on her body then exit.)*

I call upon Helen and Arlene and all the women from the group.

*(HELEN, ARLENE, and the WOMEN from the Incest Survivor Group enter. They are also enveloped in an ethereal glow and kiss Jael. They exit.)*

I call upon Magdalena from the Laundromat. I call upon Madonna, the Virgin Mary. I call upon the Dark Woman.

*(MAGDELENA, VIRGIN MARY, and the DARK WOMAN enter enveloped in light. They too kiss Jael and exit.)*

DARK WOMAN

You forgot one more.

Jael

*(Starting to cry.)*

No. No.

DARK WOMAN

Yes. All must be remembered.

Jael

I call upon Mammie. I call upon Mammie.

*(MAMMIE enters, this time there is no head wound. She is enveloped in light. She crosses to JAEL.)*

I loved you. I'm sorry.

*(MAMMIE kisses JAEL and then exits. JAEL begins to sob. A rustling is heard in the distance.)*

WALLACE (Off-stage)

Jael, is that you?

JAEL

*(Her sobs turn into joyous laughter.)*

Yes. I'm here. Down here. Come on.

*(WALLACE enters as JAEL crosses to meet him. She grabs his hand and pulls him over to the tree. JAEL takes the Dark Woman statue and puts it inside the crevice of the tree. She takes a match and ignites the Dark Woman's mossy hair. JAEL stands beside WALLACE and they watch the Dark Woman melt. WALLACE puts his arms around JAEL and they kiss passionately. Lights down.)*

Scene 13

JAEL

*(To audience.)*

For as long as I can remember, I've searched for things to worship. I found gods in crickets and gods reflected in tiny cricket eyes. I've met gods already dead, gods too young to save me. Once I prayed with my palms turned up, ready to receive. That bleak creator spit into my hands. *(Beat.)* I've learned to say thank you. I've learned to mean it. *(Beat.)* Gods change colors and spin themselves new garments every day. Sometimes wearing our own aged faces, they tap us on the shoulder, wave to say, "You're going to make it through." *(Beat.)* When you kneel to kiss the god's firm foot, find toes shaped like your own, what can you do besides worship? What can you feel except joy?

*(Lights down.)*

THE END

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Correspondence With Sheri Reynolds**

On February 12, 2004 I wrote an email to Sheri Reynolds asking for permission to adapt her novel Bitterroot Landing into a stage play. The following day I received her reply. Here is that correspondence:

Date: Thu, 12 Feb 2004  
 From: "Christy Leake" <periwinkles@prodigy.net>  
 Subject: Graduate Thesis Project  
 To: Sheri A. Reynolds" <sreynold@odu.edu>

Dear Ms. Reynolds,

My name is Christy Leake and I'm a graduate student at Virginia Commonwealth University studying to obtain my MFA in Theatre Pedagogy. The reason I'm writing to you is because I am interested in adapting one of your novels, "Bitterroot Landing," into a stage play for my senior thesis and I would like to be granted your permission to do so. The adaptation, and possible performance of the piece, would be strictly for academic purposes at this time.

The reason I'm interested in adapting "Bitterroot Landing" for my thesis is because it has remained one of my favorite pieces of literature for many years. As a theatre person, I have often thought that it would be a wonderful and poignant piece to put on the stage. I began thinking about doing an adaptation of "Bitterroot Landing" last semester when my directing teacher, Marvin Sims, informed us that our projects for this spring semester would be an adaptation. Unfortunately, Professor Sims passed away over Christmas and the directing class had to be cancelled for this semester until a replacement could be found.

However, with the support of the rest of the VCU theatre faculty, I have decided to continue my endeavor, despite the class not taking place, and develop it into my senior thesis. Therefore, I felt it was necessary to come to you before beginning this project in the hope of receiving your permission to adapt your work for the stage. If you have any questions or concerns about things I may not have addressed in this letter, feel free to contact me either via email (periwinkles@prodigy.net) or phone (804-358-2404).

Thank you so much for your time and I look forward to hearing back from you.

Sincerely,  
Christy Leake

Subject: Re: Graduate Thesis Project Question  
To: "Christy Leake" <periwinkles@prodigy.net>  
From: "Sheri A. Reynolds" <sreynold@odu.edu>  
Date: Fri, 13 Feb 2004

Wow. How exciting that you want to adapt Bitterroot! I love it. Will you show me the adaptation when you're done? I'm actually adapting a novel I wrote to a stage-play right now. It's my first attempt at a play, and it's so much fun to think in this new way. I'm loving it. I never published the novel, so I feel completely free to just cut out whole story-lines and rebuilt.

For academic purposes, I don't think you even need my permission, Christy. I should tell you that I do have an agent who handles rights-issues for me -- and if you ever wanted to do something larger with it, I'd have to put you in touch with her. I don't even know if we still have the stage-rights. At one time it was optioned for film.... I just don't know. In case you want it, my agent's name is Candice Fuhrman. Her email is candicef@pacbell.net. (I can also give you phone and address, but not off the top of my head.)

I'm flattered you'd want to work with my novel and wish you a lot of luck with it. I'm sorry you lost your teacher, by the way. That's very sad. I hope you've got other good supports over in the theatre dept. I went to VCU, too, and I miss Richmond a lot sometimes. Have you worked with the playwright in the English dept, Laura Browder?

Good luck! Let me know how it goes for you. Sheri

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## VITA

Christy Leake was born on December 19, 1973 in Frostburg, Maryland and is a United States Citizen. She graduated from Calvary Christian Academy in 1991. In 2003, Christy graduated summa cum laude from Frostburg State University, earning a Bachelor of Science degree in theatre. While an undergraduate student at Frostburg State University she had the honor of assistant directing seven productions and directing two productions, Buried Child and The Vagina Monologues.

In 2003, Christy enrolled as a graduate student in the Theatre Department at Virginia Commonwealth University where she was a teacher's assistant for Dramatic Literature and also worked as the dramaturg for Picasso at the Lapin Agile. She will complete her MFA in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University in December 2006.